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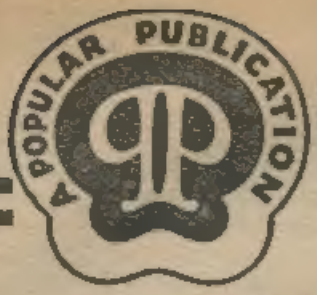

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TWO RODE OUT ALIVE!

BILL LEE hadn't been with the Arizona Skillet outfit a week before he was the most hated cowboy on that range. There was something about the Texas man's cockiness that rubbed his saddle-mates the wrong way, and they showed it. Bill Lee hated them, too, and only stayed on in the hopes of paying them back for their general cussedness.

It was when they'd been gathering wild cattle, that Lee dabbed his loop on a big red oreaña steer and took his dallies instead of tying hard and fast. After they'd recovered the Texan's rope, and caught the steer, the range boss told him he'd get his time. That was bad enough, but the grin on Tony Martin's freckled face stung Bill Lee to the quick. He began to figure that Tony Martin would be a lot better off with a bullet in him.

There was no time for that, however, because a gang of Mex renegades jumped the Skillet bunch. There was just one chance for the half-dozen Arizona cowboys to get out—and that was to take a short cut home, through Hat Canyon.

Lee was behind the rest when the boss turned back to yell, "Hold 'em for a little, will you Lee?"

He reined in his horse at the canyon mouth, a bleak smile on his face. "Hold 'em off, eh?" Hell, he didn't even belong to the outfit now!

But there was something in Bill Lee that made him unlimber his saddle-gun and take aim at the fast-riding crew of outlaws. He hadn't yet pulled the trigger when a shot rang out and Bill Lee slumped over the horn, his scalp creased by a renegade's bullet.

How he ever got out of it, Bill Lee never knew. He awoke with a blinding headache and a not very clear memory as to what happened. He was on a blown horse, and far away from either the canyon or the Skillet ranch. . . .

"All them Skillet boys was wiped out," a nester told him bitterly. "The sheriff an' posse are on the trail now. But they sent back word that if they ever run across a cowboy named Lee, they'll make him plenty hard to catch. He told his pards he'd hold the mouth of the canyon for 'em, but they found his carbine and it hadn't been fired. The boys in town have a rope handy for him if he ever turns up. . . ."

He changed his name and rode long and far. Always with him he saw the dead, accusing eyes of the men he'd ridden with; men who must have thought even as they were dying that he'd left them when they needed him. And perhaps they'd been right. Hadn't he hated them, hoped to pay them off for a thousand injuries. . . ?

The story of that red afternoon of tragedy followed hard on Bill Lee's back-trail. He changed his name; in six months his black hair had turned gray. Lines of worry seamed his face; his eyes were haunted. At last he got a trail-hand's job with the Bar 8, herd shoving up from Texas.

The cowboy who had been Bill Lee was a lone wolf when he signed on as trail-hand with the Bar 8 outfit. His eyes were like the burnt-out coals of hell, he kept seeing the ghosts of the men who must have cursed him with their dying breath. How could they have believed that he'd stick?

The herd was bedded down near Little Wagon Creek when a drifting cowpuncher stopped by. It seemed that one man in that Hat Canyon fight was still living—a gent named Tony Martin, who wouldn't die despite a hideful of lead. Then there was another feller named Lee, who ran away, wasn't there? Anyhow, Martin was headed this way, supposed to be on Lee's trail. He'd like to be around when the showdown came. . . .

Suddenly, Bill Lee was afraid. He wasn't so much afraid of his chances of dying, or of Martin's gun. He was afraid of the burning scorn and the undying hate with which he knew Tony Martin would face him. And of

the unbelieving, sneering laughter if he ever tried to tell Martin the truth. . . .

When he rode up to camp three nights later, he caught the undercurrent of excitement and tension. Instinctively he knew that Tony Martin was hunkering there beside the campfire. He put his horse in the remuda, and walked up, his hand swinging near his gun.

Slowly, Tony Martin rose to his feet, looking Lee over from eyes that were bleak and cold. There was a twisted smile on his thin lips, and he spoke in a curiously dead voice.

"You got a gun in your hand, Lee," the ex-Skillet hand said. "Go ahead and use it. No one would expect anything different from a black-hearted murderer who run out on his outfit. I hear you're using some other name now, but if the boss will look on the under-side of your saddle flap, he'll see your right name, and the Skillet brand there, where you burned 'em the day after you signed up. I just wanted the boys here to know what kind of snake they was riding with."

Bill Lee couldn't speak for a moment. It was happening just as he had seen it in a thousand nightmares. . . . "I'll give you your chances," Bill Lee said in a voice that quavered. "Any time you want it. . . ."

McCarey, the trail boss had watched and heard the whole thing. "So you admit that you're that Lee snake, eh?" he growled. "I got your check here. Saddle up your private horse an' ride."

Bill Lee did just that. And later that night, Tony Martin slipped away, too. When he came back, he sat a long time by the fire, winding a bandage about his arm. Then he cleaned his gun, and there was a disappointed bitterness in his eyes. . . .

A week after that, the herd was pulled up on the banks of the flooded Red River, when the longhorns spooked. They started in a mad headlong rush toward the swirling flood which would be sure death for more than half of them as the Bar 8 hands tried vainly to mill the cattle.

McCarey, in the lead, was working to head in the leaders, but he hadn't a chance of doing it before they reached the water. Tony Martin, who had taken Lee's place, was beside the boss as the locoed cows surged into the stream, carrying with them McCarey and Martin.

A heavy piece of driftwood knocked McCarey senseless, and Martin, trying to reach him through that sea of frightened cattle, had his shoulder gored by a razor-sharp horn. No one on that side saw the figure of a rider on the other bank jump his horse into the stream and swim out toward the wildly tossing horned heads.

A few hours later, a mud-covered, exhausted hombre was staggering up with the boss over his shoulder. His other hand was dragging Martin by the hair.

"By God!" breathed one of the trail crew, after the three men had some of the river water bailed out of them, "damn if it ain't this Lee jigger who brung out the boss an' Martin!"

Tony Martin shook his head weakly. "No," he said, "it's the gent I thought was Bill Lee. The gent that McCarey shouldn't of fired, because I made a plumb bad mistake. Bill Lee, I reckon, wouldn't of had the guts to do what this feller did."

"You're a liar, Martin," Bill Lee said thinly. "I didn't gun you that night, because I wanted a chance to tell what really happened back in Hat Canyon. I'm Lee, all right, an' . . ." He gasped out his story. . . .

He didn't mention the living hell he'd been through; and the one last chance that he'd taken to get out of it. . . .

Tony Martin's hand gripped Lee's. "There wouldn't be no cause for you to lie now, kid," he said, "you're a real man—the kind that would never quit his outfit in a tight. I'll ride the river—well, I'll be damned!"

Bill Lee was asleep. But even then he must have heard, for he was smiling. . . .

—THE MAVERICK

REVOLT OF THE

Her shrill scream knifed through the room, carrying a warning for Will. . . .

In the vanguard of westering steel rails rode Hell's own crew—the riff-raff, tinhorns and killers-for-hire from a thousand depleted Tent-Cities—to prey upon the God-fearing people of old Laramie. Vainly, young Will Vining sought the man to lead his panicked town from its bitter gun-wolf bondage—never dreaming that he himself must make the last desperate back-to-the-wall stand, to save his honest neighbors—and a brave girl who had damned him—from red destruction!

PRAIRIE LEGION

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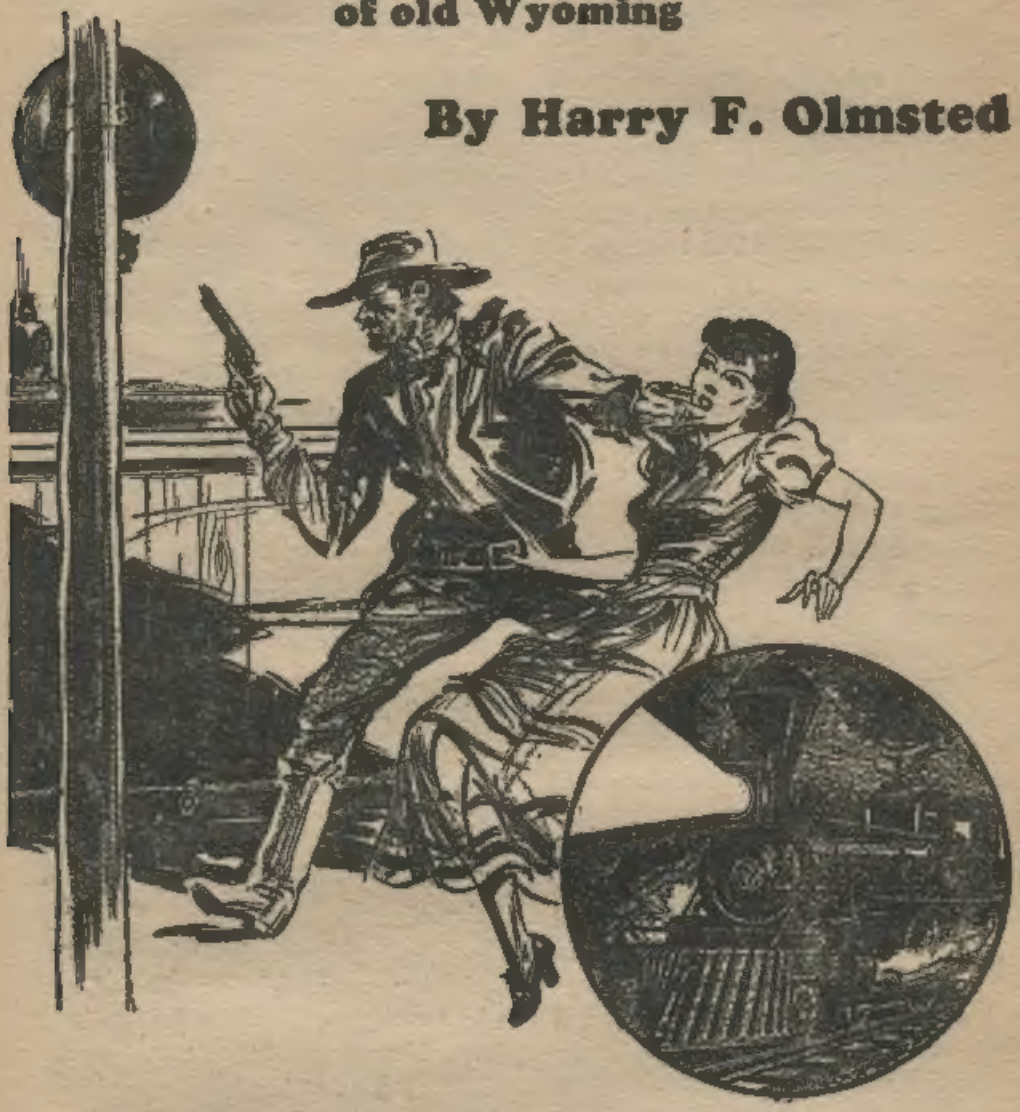

CHAPTER ONE

King of a Boom-Town Empire

THE icy, snow-laden wind from the north moaned a dirge-like requiem over a dying town. Lusty, sinful Cheyenne, having flowered into a carnal sort of splendor with the coming of the U. P. rails, was expiring—suddenly and violently. Only a few short hours ago its main streets had glittered with lurid lights and the tinsel of faithlessness, but now the pulse of its robust revels had given way to the delirium preceding death.

From somewhere word had leaked out that the new railroad headquarters would be at Laramie, fifty-odd miles to the west. It was information no boomer could ignore. Activity rolled along Cheyenne's

streets like tumbleweeds before a storm wind. Huge, high-wheeled wagons rumbled out of the bleak, gray murk, their teams steaming and ill tempered. Busy men, coated and gloved against the chill, raced in and out of stained tent structures and weathered clapboard buildings. Furniture, supplies, gambling paraphernalia and the thousand and one things designated to serve the tastes of six thousand restless spirits were being piled into the wagons.

Workmen, like ants, fell upon emptied shelters with hammer and ax, saw and crowbar, wrecking and loading the precious materials for transport to Laramie. A steady stream of loaded wagons creaked westward, with hame bells tinkling. The steady pound of hammers was a broken drum beat. Bawled orders and the shouting of workers made a babel of Cheyenne.

Yonder a line of house roofs gave way as supports were loosened and straining men pushed them over. Along the street came covered wagons filled with girls, their faces frightened blots as they peered out at the confusion. Yes, Cheyenne was dying. And the soft snow sifted down as if to cover glaring, man-made scars.

Moving unhurriedly along the walk, with eyes cocked for any possible danger to themselves, came two buffalo-coated men, Ed Peril and Boomer Stull. They were as different as two men can be—Peril, a slender, handsome man, small of stature and possessed of a cat-like quickness; Stull a slow moving giant with great barrel-like chest, bulging biceps, heavy jaw and square-muscled thighs like tree boles. They made a contrast, those two, as they moved along, yet in the arrogance of their striding and in the studied chill of their faces, they were alike.

MATCHING strides with military precision, these two made their way to the front of a small frame structure, halting there as if by command to stare up at a rudely painted sign swaying and creaking in the wind, advertising Matt Dunleavey, contractor; teams and hauling.

Boomer Stull shouldered inside, where a bulky, gray-haired man sat at a disordered desk. Behind Boomer, Ed Peril closed the door softly, his back to the panel.

Boomer Stull cleared his throat. "We want some information, Dunleavey," he said. "Noah Gauze has learned you're charging a dollar a wagon-mile to Laramie. Is that right?"

The Irish contractor scowled. "What if I am?" he countered.

"The price is two dollars," said Stull.

Fighting lights danced across Dunleavey's cheeks. "A sorry day it is whin Matthew Dinnis Dunleavey takes orders from Noah Gauze, the shpalpeen. Yez can tell him Oi own me teams and wagons and that Oi'll charge me own price. Divil a bit will Oi knuckle to him. Me price is a dollar a wagon-mile to Laramie City; what would yez be afther doin' about it, me hearties?"

Boomer Stull laughed tauntingly. "Think it over, Mick," he warned. "Gauze runs Rag City, and the sooner you find it out, the better off you'll be. He makes the laws, and expects all men to live up to them."

"Oh-ho," grinned the Irishman. "So that's your game, eh? Tell Noah Gauze to let me alone or I'll bust him into small pieces. Now git outa here, ye scum, or . . ."

His toil-gnarled hands balled into fists as he stepped from behind his counter. Boomer Stull gave back before him, but Ed Peril swayed forward, pulling a pistol from his pocket. Calmly he drove a bullet into the Irishman.

Dunleavey hurled himself at the gunman, but strength deserted him and he pitched to the floor, dead before he measured his length. . . .

Outside, the roar of destruction continued undiminished, the thin echo of the shot swallowed by the turmoil. Ed Peril

pocketed his weapon and led the way outside. Boomer closed the door carefully and the two of them angled across the street to the office of the *Cheyenne Sentinel*, frontier newspaper.

WILL VINING, owner and editor, was helping Old Pie, the printer's devil, pack the type and other loose paraphernalia of the office. Tall, slender and a little stooped, Vining had the face of a dreamer and the long fingers and flowing hair of a poet. Life to Will Vining was an idyl, spoiled only by the badly-footed meter of violence, hate and greed. In witnessing the death of once-booming Cheyenne, his mind was more upon the obituary than upon the robust orgy of destruction that went on about him.

"Pie," he said morosely, "here we are at the jumping-off place again. Since leaving Omaha, each time we set up the press, we start on a new adventure, getting out a tramp sheet that hops across a continent in small jumps, like a toad. But every time it happens, I feel sad that a town must die when we leave. . . ." His voice died away.

Old Pie, thin to a point of cadaverousness, finished nailing a cover on a box and raised his angular face. His sunken eyes burned.

"A tramp sheet," he echoed. "Yep, that's us, boss. Gathering the news of six thousand wild men who don't know they're making news, who pay us to print a sheet to remind them of the thing that happened to them only yesterday. We should be glad that such fools are running loose, instead of feeling sorry for a few acres of lonely prairie. There'll be more news in Laramie than there was in Cheyenne, and men will be just that much hungrier to read our sheet. . . ."

He broke off, his eyes widening a little as he stared at the door. And Will Vining followed his glance. The panel was opening and Boomer Stull was pushing inside, with quiet, deadly Ed Peril on his heels.

"Howdy, Vining," Boomer said. "Moving to Laramie, are you?" And when the newspaper man nodded, he added: "We'll have two wagons here in an hour. The price will be four dollars a mile, for both. Two hundred and eight dollars."

"Wait," remonstrated Will Vining. "I've already arranged with Matt Dunleavey to move me."

"If you move at all," said Boomer coldly, "we'll move you. Matt Dunleavey's dead."

He turned on his heel and walked out, Ed Peril flashing Will Vining a taunting grin as he followed. When Noah Gauze's two gunmen were gone, Will Vining turned to Old Pie.

"Matt Dunleavey dead?" he murmured. "Why—I hadn't known Matt was sick."

The printer rolled a huge quid on his toothless gums. "From all the signs," he said, drily, "Matt's last illness must have been brief. You know Noah Gauze is cornering all private business along the line? Matt was independent and courageous. That's all it takes to earn a grave in Rag City."

"You mean," stammered the newspaperman, "that they murdered Matt?"

Old Pie nodded. "It's the making of a rare headline for the first copy of the Laramie *Sentinel*. I'll take care of things here. You write the story."

Will Vining nodded. He caught up his pad, hurried across the street to Matt Dunleavey's office. For a moment he paused before the door, then he let himself inside.

Rugged Matt lay upon his back, staring with sightless, open eyes at the ceiling and Will Vining knew a growing fear of Noah Gauze. Not fear for himself, but for the welfare of any growing town which permitted such ruthlessness and greed to thrive upon it. He sank into the dead contractor's chair, and after awhile, anger came to him. Impulsively, he laid his

pad on the desk and wrote his story. It was an inspired piece, reflecting his revulsion against this last of Noah Gauze's acts of selfish cruelty, and it was pointed with all the magic that was in his pen.

He pictured Noah Gauze as a monster, opposed to the very essence of freedom. A man demanding serfdom of free men as the price of the right to live. A greedy parasite enslaving women and men, robbing workers and business men and amassing vast wealth, stained with the blood of those who dared defy him. He wrote a glowing tribute of Matt Dunleavey, who had chosen to die free rather than live on, enslaved to Noah Gauze. One by one, Vining reviewed the crimes chargeable to this fattening octopus, reminding his readers that just as Gauze grew in strength and boldness, just so did their own safety diminish, and to just that degree was Gauze retarding the progress of the rails westward. There must be action, Will reminded them. Decent men must rise to Gauze's challenge, as the vigilantes once rose against the tyranny of crime in Virginia City and in San Francisco; as the outraged Southern planters rose against the carpetbaggers below the Mason-Dixon Line.

Having finished his editorial, Will Vining rose, folded the sheets and placed them carefully in his coat pocket. He was very grim as he stepped from that room of death.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood of a Fighting Man

OUT of the final throes of Cheyenne had come the labor pains that gave birth to Laramie City. The new town was built in the image of the old, the difference being that, in the rush for favored locations, those who had once been neighbors were now removed from one another. The weather had cleared, but an unkind wind chanted its dirge from the eaves of flimsy frame buildings and whipped at the canvas sides of lesser shelters.

Huge wheeled freight wagons, driven by men paying tribute to Gauze, rumbled among the mud-churned way. The wind carried the echoes of busy hammers and saws, the blaring music of Noah Gauze's Big Tent and the untempered exuberance of a half hundred Irish track layers—in from the Casement Brothers' camp with wild appetites for whiskey, women and excitement.

From the newly-organized office of the *Sentinel*, the first edition of the paper was moving to the street, carried by men crippled on construction and filling in at odd jobs until able once more to assume their duties.

Behind his desk, Will Vining scanned the sheet with morose eyes. He was not proud of it. Upon the first page was the uncolored story of Matt Dunleavey's murder during the death of Cheyenne. And, without comment, the flat statement that before Dunleavey's demise he had sold his teams and wagons to Noah Gauze.

"By party or parties unknown," a hastily drawn coroner's jury had found, with robbery the undoubted motive.

That's what Will Vining had written about the tragedy, and right now his scathing indictment of Noah Gauze lay hidden in his inner pocket. Bitterly, the newspaperman reflected, that was truly an indictment against himself, and against old Pie as well.

For it had been the cadaverous oldster who had read that bitter editorial and had argued long and fiercely against printing it.

"It ain't that I'm so scared of dyin' son," the old tramp printer had told Vining. "But it just ain't good sense to run a thing like that at this time. Noah Gauze is holdin' this town in the hollow of his hand. He controls the whole business, an' if that piece is published, it'll likely be the last issue we can get out, for a time, any-

how. We'll come down here some mornin' and find a wrecked press, scattered type, and maybe a few smouldering embers of our plant. I've seen that sort of thing happen before. We ought to play it easy, until we know where we stand. No sir, the sign just ain't right for us to go blastin' Gauze—if we want to keep on puttin' out this sheet regular."

And unwillingly, Vining had been forced to admit that the old man was probably right. The readers of the *Sentinel* would be sure to agree with that story against Gauze. Yes, they would agree with him and hail him for his public spirit. And, by the same token, they would stand back and allow him to face alone the killers of Noah Gauze, as well as trying to start up his paper from the wreckage left by Gauze's destroying hirelings.

A bitter inner struggle shook Will, a struggle that must have shown on his face. For suddenly he was aware of old Pie staring at him. The oldster said: "Sometimes, boss, I get to thinking too deep. You're young, with your life all before you. Maybe I'm tryin' to take too much on myself by handin' you advice which is none of my business. You'll have to find things like that out for yourself. But don't wait too long, son, to start. Don't wait too long, like I have. I'm old and sometimes I think I've lived long enough. Some day I'll get to thinking that way and make an end to this struggle by doin' one, fine decent thing." A shudder ran through him and he threw his hands wide. "Aw, hell, boss, I'm goin' over and get a drink."

He left the office, and Will Vining knew what he had meant was that he was going to get drunk. Yet tomorrow morning, with the rising of the sun, he would be on the job, sober as a judge, steady as a clock.

Fuller contemplation of the typesetter's words took Will's mind off himself, gave him a start of fear for that strange old character who had tied himself to the fortunes of the *Sentinel*. It was as if old Pie had said: "Because you are young, I'm afraid of what Noah Gauze will do to you. But I'm old, and why should I be afraid of the death I must face anyway?"

Not until then had Will realized how much he loved old Pie; how fully he had come to lean upon him.

WILL turned troubled eyes to the lusty confusion of the street. He saw men buying his paper, reading it. Yonder, before the Big Tent, Noah Gauze's men clustered about a copy of the sheet. He saw their heads tip back, caught the raucous echoes of their laughter. He knew why they were laughing, knew they had it coming. Well, he consoled himself, they would have laughed doubly loud if the Sentinel had carried his attack on Gauze.

The walls of the office seemed suddenly to press Vining in. He came to his feet, a prey to chaotic emotions, and lunged out the door. Stepping onto the walk, he was bumped heavily from behind. Resentment and anger arising from the sense of oppression of Noah Gauze, from which he could not rid himself, made him whirl, drawing back his fist.

Then strong fingers caught his arm and a broad, smiling face loomed before him. "It's my fault, suh," drawled the tall, angular man in weathered buckskins. "There's a powerful lot of people in this town an' I reckon I was gawkin' at the sights. I'll be proud to buy you-all a drink."

He and the tall man moved along the walk and turned into a saloon. In this tall Texan, Will Vining sensed a kindred spirit.

Here was one he actually could look up to, though there was nothing truculent or pugnacious about him. His was the lithe, free action of a wildling, giving off a sense of hidden strength, absolute control and the fearlessness born in conflict with the wilderness.

They filled their glasses. "Will Vining, of the *Sentinel*," said the newspaperman.

"Wick Alhorn, of Texas. Pleased tuh meet you, suh. Here's how!"

They drank, and drank again. With the liquor warming them, they set their glasses down. A friendly chuckle came from Wick Alhorn's throat. Carelessly, he brushed his wide hat back, allowing wavy, corn-colored hair to cascade about his forehead. He turned his back to the bar, braced himself on widespread elbows, his sparkling blue eyes scanning the barroom.

His pose sent a thrill through Will. It was an instinctive reflection of the contempt in which strong men of the wilderness hold the lesser breed from man-made centers. Will envied him that, and reached desperately to capture some of it.

The man seemed to sense Will's hunger and smiled at him from those fearless blue eyes. "Will Vining of the *Sentinel*, eh? And what is this *Sentinel*, partner?"

"The newspaper," said Will, without pride.

"Ah!" The Texan's interest was real. "I am honored, suh. Reckon it takes a mighty big man to run a paper, a man who knows things an' passes them on to us who don't know nothin'. It's your kind that make leaders, suh, who must tell us common folk how to walk."

A little ashamed, Will changed the subject. "Do you work on the railroad, Mister Alhorn?"

"Me?" Amusement shook the Texan. "No suh. I'm a hunter. Though you might say I'm workin' for the railroad. Less than an hour ago, I signed with General Casement to furnish buffalo meat for his tracklayin' camps. The easiest job I ever got, suh. They've been payin' ten cents a pound on contract. I signed for five an' I'll make big money."

WILL VINING'S pleasure in this new acquaintanceship was washed away abruptly. "Mister Alhorn," he said fiercely, "you say a newspaper man knows things and passes them on to other people. All right, listen to me. When you signed that contract, you signed your death warrant."

The Texan's smile faded as he turned to face Will. "What do you mean, suh?"

"When the rails reached Sidney," said Will, "Noah Gauze contracted to furnish the Casement camps with meat—at ten cents a pound. He has kept his contract and has made a fortune. In the last seven months as many men have signed contracts to hunt for less. But Noah Gauze still furnishes all the meat for the camps. Where are the others, Mister Alhorn?"

"Well," said the Texan, "where are they, suh?"

"Dead," said Will. "In gunshot graves. Murdered!"

The Texan stiffened and his eyes narrowed. His cheeks, saddle-browned by sun and wind, flattened and his wide mouth became a grim, tight line. His long fingers busied themselves with a cigarette. To Will, his silence was far more suggestive of destruction than the arrogance of Boomer Stull or the blatancy of Mallet Murphy.

"Mister Vining, suh," said the Texan, finally, "my grandfather died in the Alamo 'cause he wouldn't put up with a thing like that. My father died at Gettysburg fighting those who insisted on running his affairs. I'll hunt buffalo, Mister Vining, and give the meat away if I want to. If Mister Gauze don't like it, he'll have to fight."

Then, as if ashamed of his anger, he tossed a coin to the bar and led the way. Hitching his holstered gun as he moved. Will followed and, as they paused before the saloon, the Texan flashed a smile, held out his hand. He said:

"Yore warnin' upset me, Vining But I want to thank you kindly. I hope we meet again, suh."

He was shaking hands, when he sud-

denly stiffened. In Will's ears was a sodden impact against Alhorn's side, and then the sharp, snarling echo of a gunshot.

Will threw a startled glance toward the sound, saw one of Noah Gauze's henchmen withdraw a smoking gun from a second story window of Madam Celeste's place, across the street, and his quick down-pulling of the shade. Then the Texan was crumpling to the walk, a moan issuing from his lips, his fingers, limp and lifeless now, still gripped in Will's shocked hand.

CHAPTER THREE

"We Who Are About to Die—"

STUNNED and sickened, Will knelt beside Alhorn's inert form. His mind seizing upon the incredible change an ounce of lead had wrought in this strong, courageous man. Wick Alhorn's eyes were closed, his face a pasty gray. The strength Will had envied was gone, replaced with the pitiful uselessness of a stillborn child

Will called the hunter's name over and over again, the beginning of a mighty revolt taking shape within him. It was as if Alhorn's fighting spirit was finding lodgment in his own soul. Then, through the fog of his resentment, a far voice sounded.

"Is he dead, man? What happened?"

Will lifted his eyes, startled to find himself hemmed by staring banks of men. "Dead!" nodded Will. "Shot down without a chance. . . !"

"Who did it?" snapped one, and dull mutterings of rage swept the gathering.

Savagely, Will said: "Who? Noah Gauze, of course. No, he didn't fire the shot, but it was done at his order, by one of his men in from that window yonder. I saw it."

Will sensed the swift fear in their eyes, the freezing of their features and the sudden death of their muttering. Only then did he realize what he had said. It startled him. By all the rules, he had condemned himself to death. He bit off his rush of angry words.

The silence of the crowd increased, even as their numbers grew. Then a man broke through and knelt beside the fallen Texan. A slender, well-groomed man with a solemn, thoughtful face and wispy, down-curving mustache.

He was handsomely dressed, but as he bared the wound and expertly turned back the eyelids of the Texan, his manner smacked more of medical proficiency than the legendary expertness with cards for which John Talliaferro was famed.

"This man is not dead," he said, crisply. "But he will be, if he loses much more blood."

Someone cried: "Get him down to the railroad hospital and Doc Smith!"

The gambler shook his head. "Not time," he snapped. "I'll attend him. Lift him, boys, and we'll get him inside."

"Bring him in my place," said Will. "There's a cot. . ." And he darted along the walk to open the door.

When they had placed Wick Alhorn upon Will's bed, the gambler ordered the room cleared. Will forced them all outside and put old Pie, much the worse for whiskey, to guard the door.

In the back room, John Talliaferro had rolled up his shirt sleeevs and taken off the Texan's clothes.

"Whiskey," he snapped. "Hot water! A basin! Clean rags, and a sheet if you have it!"

Old Pie had a bottle in his back pocket. A tea kettle was already simmering on the pot-bellied stove. From a chest of almost forgotten luxuries, Will took a folded sheet.

"Now," said the gambler, "don't bother me. Keep back until I need you."

Will retreated to the doorway of the printing room from which he watched this strange, dominant man match the

bets of death in a game for a human life. From his coat, Talliaferro took a compact leather case, containing shiny probes, scapels and surgeon's scissors. These he boiled in the basin atop the stove, drained off the water and cooled them with a pint of whiskey. Carefully, he read his patient's pulse, forced whiskey between his lips and went to work.

He was probing for the bullet when the disturbance started at the door of the *Sentinel*.

There came the shrill excited plaint of a woman, the partial opening and closing of the front door. Old Pie's whiskey-thick voice denied someone entrance and warned them away.

Disturbed, Will took his eyes from Talliaferro's expert fingers, and whirled about as the door flung open before a desperate-eyed girl. By her fierceness alone she swept the unsteady typesetter aside and came rushing to Will

"Where is he?" she demanded tensely. "Where have you got him? How bad is he hurt?"

Will caught her arm, but so great was her desperation, that she broke away, twisted past him and entered the room where Wick Alhorn lay. Sobbing, she flew toward the cot, and was elbowed roughly back as John Talliaferro rose from his work.

"Get her out of here, Vining," he snapped. "This man's got little enough chance without that."

The girl hurtled back and Will caught her, holding her tightly. "Steady, ma'am," he murmured. "No matter what he is to you, you cannot deny him that slim chance!"

THOUGH she did not look at him, she gave up struggling, and rested in his arms, her breast heaving as she stared fixedly at the miracle happening on that cot. She pressed against Will as if for support, while Talliaferro extracted the bullet, sterilized the wound with whiskey and bound the man tightly with long strips of sheeting.

Once she half turned to Will, murmuring: "He—he's a great doctor, isn't he?"

"And no one suspected it," answered Will Vining. Then the wonder of it was minimized by his sudden realization of her exquisite beauty. Half bashfully he released her, moved a step away.

John Talliaferro finished washing and drying his hands, took a last gage of the wounded man's pulse and turned brooding eyes upon the pair who watched him.

"He'll live, I think," he said tonelessly. "Give him a tablespoon of whiskey every half hour. I'll be back at noon."

Admiration touched Will Vining's face as he stuck out his hand. "That was a wonderful thing you just did, Talliaferro. You—you're a great doctor!"

Talliaferro's face darkened and his lips compressed. "I'm a gambler, Vining," he said, angrily. "And that's all I am. Please don't forget it—ever!"

The girl swayed forward to lay her fingers on his arm. "Gambler or doctor," she murmured, "the difference is not important. If you've saved Wick Allhorn's life, you've also earned my undying thanks." There were tears in her voice. "I'm his sister, Gay Alhorn. He—he is all I have."

The gambler's eyes softened as he looked upon her. "You may have faith," he said, "I'll do everything I can to save his life. You see, a good gambler's never afraid to take a chance."

"That's why you were able to do what we just saw," put in Will. "That's why you're a great doctor."

Talliaferro turned on him, tigerishly. "For God's sake, man!" he cried, "can't you let me forget that?"

Then he was rushing from the room, as if fleeing the ghost of some ancient tragedy. When the door had slammed, the girl turned brimming eyes to Will Vining.

"Somewhere he has been terribly hurt," she murmured, "and he's running from it. But it's a race no man ever won. Peace comes only by standing your ground and fighting. I hope some day he finds the courage for it."

She had analyzed his own feelings so clearly that Will was ashamed. He flushed and was glad when she turned away to kneel beside her brother.

Alhorn was still unconscious, and after awhile the girl rose. Will was startled by the change in her. She was grim, strangely like her brother had been when Will warned him of his danger there in the saloon.

"They told me on the street," she said abruptly, "that you know who shot my brother. Who is it?"

"I saw him," began Will, "but—" He was poignantly conscious of the old fear prompting him to silence. He had talked on the street. He had said too much.

The girl was rudely impatient. "But—nothing!" she snapped. "Who did it?"

Will was trying to frame his answer when the front door opened without protest from old Pie. A heavy tread pounded the floor. A towering, bulky form filled the portal and a heavy voice was saying: "Who did what?"

Both Will and the girl whirled to face Noah Gauze, King of Rag City. His black eyes threw glints at them, and his dark face seemed to blend into the gloom of the room. He was chewing upon an unlighted cigar as he flicked a glance at the man on the cot.

"You mean who shot this man, is that it?" he asked. And, without waiting for an answer: "Which brings up the reason for my visit, Vining. They tell me that, in your excitment, you made statements damaging my character." He beamed upon Will. "You must have learned, my friend, that I am slow to anger. And I will be the first to forgive your hysteria, under the circumstances. Yes, that was it, hysteria. You were hysterically irresponsible. I'm sure you will be glad to say so in your paper, Mister Vining. Am I right?"

Will Vining's voice, that he would have admired to key to a fighting pitch, was only a murmur.

"Yes, I was hysterical," he said. "I talked too much. I'll be glad to explain the facts in my paper."

Smug content flowed into the big man's cheeks. He purred: "I was sure you'd do the right thing, Vining. Thank you. And good-day." He tipped his hat and went out.

WILL VINING kept his eyes on the floor, evading the girl's gaze. And while her silence was damning, her succeeding words were something worse.

"So you were hysterical!" she said tartly. "You might have added that you were yellow. You cringed before that man like a whipped cur. What are you, any-

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way, a man or a low, crawling worm?"

It stung Will. He asked: "Is a whole town yellow that steps lightly before a killer and his gun-wolves?"

"Yellow and worse!" she replied. "What other kind of a town will tolerate that sort of thing? Why doesn't Laramie get rid of him?"

"Because there's no one to lead," confessed Will miserably. "No one to organize us against the hired killers."

Fierce restlessness seemed to grip Gay Alhorn. She dipped her hand into a type case, let the ink-smudged letters trickle through her fingers. She moved scornfully to the press, gave the wheel a scornful spin, then picked up the first copy of the *Laramie Sentinel* and ran cynical eyes across the headlines. Crumpling the sheet, she tossed it from her.

"No one to lead you," she said softly, bitterly. "No one to organize a whole town against a few crooks." Then she moved to the window, her shoulders shaking.

Miserably, Will knew her words for a rebuke against himself. Within his hands had been placed a torch of leadership, then he had allowed it to expire.

He made a last effort to defend himself. "Please listen to me!" he pleaded, moving over to swing her about.

Words poured like a torrent off his tongue as he told the story of Noah Gauze, and his ever-tightening grip of steel on the railhead metropolis. He spoke of the man's fierce will for monopoly, his scorn of law, his long series of crimes, robbery, assault and murder. And last, this cowardly shooting of her own brother.

"There have been those who thought they could lead," he finished, "but Noah Gauze soon proved how wrong they were. He and his lawless outfit laugh at my little sheet. What do you think I can do?"

Yet, even before he had finished, he knew how utterly he had failed to convince her. And the echoes of his voice were still in the room when she said: "Why shouldn't they laugh at your sheet? You knuckle to them and print what they want you to print. You've thrown away a great opportunity because you're afraid to face what must be faced. Well, forget who shot my brother. I'll find out who shot Wick and, if I have to—" her eyes went to her brother—"I'll take care of it myself." She was sobbing as she finished, turning away from him as she returned to the cot.

Humiliated, Will Vining walked into the outer office, and slumped dejectedly into his desk chair. Nor could he have told why he got out the editorial he had written after the murder of Matt Dunleavey, or why he spread it out and read it for the hundredth time.

That reading did something to Will. He knew the article was the best thing he had ever done. Its sentiment was every inch the image he aspired to, but never seemed able to approach.

OUT of those scribbled sheets, came intoxication. He reached for pad and pencil and began to write. It didn't take him long to revise his editorial, to bring it down to date.

He dealt with the slinking toughs who hung out in the Big Tent and who looked to Noah Gauze for their bounty. Scathingly, he spoke of Ed Peril and Boomer Stull and other killers—among them Mug Bezdek, the one whose face he had seen behind the smoking rifle, in Madame Celeste's upstairs window.

Fervently, he spoke of Sam Reed, General Superintendent of the U. P. and his futile efforts to control the agitators who were throttling the heartbeat of America's first transcontinental line. And last, but in no wise least in his own consciousness, he lauded John Talliaferro, the one square gambler in the Big Tent, who had proved himself a brilliant surgeon, now wasting his talents on cards and dice and a little spinning ball.

When Will rose with the sheets gripped in his hand, he was trembling. Body, mind and soul, he had given himself utterly to a recklessness he had never before known. Three strides took him across the room to where old Pie, in an alcoholic daze, sat slumped against the wall. Will shook him roughly, pressed the sheets into his hand.

"Set this up, Pie!" he commanded. "And make it right. Right, you understand? This is the *Sentinel's* first special edition!"

The old printer focused his eyes as he read. With the sense of the words beginning to burn into his dulled brain he shook his head to clear it, climbed shakily to his feet. And, gripped in a kind of a palsy, he finished the reading.

When he was done, the whiskey flush upon his face had given way to a pallor. Dullness fled his eyes and a touch of pride stiffened his sunken cheeks. After the manner of a cavalier, he brought his heels together, bowed low from the waist. Turning his eyes aloft, he tossed his hand with a gesture of finality.

"God of all printers' devils, we who are about to die salute you!" he said.

Then he was lunging toward the back room, muttering to himself. Repeating whole passages of the thing he had just read, cackling openly. Before Will resumed his seat, type was clicking into Pie's rule. Letters making words! Words building sentences! Sentences damning Noah Gauze, and the things he stood for.

Noon brought John Talliaferro to look at his patient. Will made no acknowledgement of the man's salute, nor did he rouse enough to gain the intelligence of the words passing between the gambler and the girl. Talliaferro left with a brusque statement, saying that he'd be back after supper.

Again there was only the rhythmical clicking of type in the back room. After awhile, Will heard old Pie hammering, and knew the galley was complete. He heard the inked roller singing over the type. Then the old typesetter was laying a moist sheet before him. Resting his stubbled chin on Will's shoulder as he read.

Will penciled the piece, passed it across his shoulder with a crisp: "Run it! Run it—and God help us all!"

For one brief moment, old Pie's gnarled fingers dug into Will's shoulder. It was at once a promise and a trust. The old fellow's words came back to Will: "There's hell to pay, boss, an' hell is hot!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Showdown!

DEEP into the night, Will Vining and old Pie took turns at the ancient hand press, one cranking, the other feeding. They were turning out papers that were to electrify a town grown smug in its tolerance. Throughout those hours, Gay Alhorn sat by the side of her stricken brother. She was watching the monotonously ticking clock and, in accordance with John Talliaferro's orders, spooning whiskey between the unconscious man's lips at half hour periods. Nor did she pay the slightest heed to the pair laboring on the first special edition of the *Sentinel*.

Now and again, Will cast a glance at her, each time feeling a tug at his throat. Sometime after midnight, the girl rose to walk away her drowsiness. It was then she picked up a copy of the paper, and sat down beside the guttering light to read it.

With the sense of Will's editorial in her mind, she got up, her face a little more pale, her eyes frightened. "This!" she cried, stabbing a forefinger at the sheet. "*You're* printing this?"

"For better or for worse," said Will.

And then, with feminine perversity, Gay was arguing against it. "Do you know what you're doing?" she cried. "Have you

forgotten those things you told me about Noah Gauze? Are you blind to my brother struggling for his life?"

"I've forgotten none of those things," said Will stolidly. "Least of all the way you received my telling of them. Nor will I ever forget the picture of my own cowardice that you drew. I'm starting now to live it down."

"And so," she said, with a touch of scorn, "you'd walk alone into muzzles of their guns, sacrificing all your hopes and dreams and the good you might accomplish with your life, just because a grief-stricken girl drew a picture you do not like."

She moved close to lay her fingers on his arm. "Listen, Will! I had no right to draw that picture. I was—well, hysterical. Yes, Noah Gauze's word will do. Hysterical. This is not your best. Your leadership cannot be best expressed in sheer recklessness against impossible odds. Can't you see how much better it would be for you to organize public opinion slowly into odds that will sweep men like Gauze aside"

Will was ready with an answer. "There can be no organization," he said, "without a leader—a leader to give some of his courage to the others. I have carried this story in my pocket for lack of courage to print it. If I do not print it now, I probably never will."

He looked at her a long time, until she dropped her eyes. Then he added, "For I should always be afraid that the inspiration for my present courage might slip away and leave me—hysterical, again."

Fight left the girl. In little more than a whisper, she protested: "If I let you print this, I'll always feel that I—that I killed you."

A weak voice from the cot said: "What do you mean, Sis? How can you feel that you've killed Mister Vining?"

"Wick!" sobbed the girl, and crossed to his bedside. And there, upon her knees, she blurted out what she had told Will in scorn, and of his reckless determination to commit suicide by printing the attack on Noah Gauze. A story all Rag City knew, yet dared not mention.

When she had finished, the wounded man turned feverish eyes upon Will. "She's right, suh," he said, sternly. "You must not do this thing. Us Alhorn's, Mister Vining, are used to trompin' our own skunks. It will be a pleasure, suh, for me to tromp this one. Hold up that story for a few days until I can get on my feet. I'll call upon this Mister Gauze then, and you will have nothing to fear when your story is printed. Besides that," he smiled wistfully, "you'll have a new story to go with it. Yes suh! A real stirrin' story, if I'm a judge."

Will nodded thoughtfully. Yes, he knew the kind of story he'd be forced to print if he waited until Wick got on his feet. The story of a tall Texas buffalo hunter found dead in the alley behind the Big Tent. He'd printed that story many times. He could dig it out of his files and have only to change the name, the occupation and the circumstance.

But all he said was, "Faster, Pie! We'll have to hurry if we finish by breakfast. And you, Wick, you better not talk so much. It won't be doing you any good."

Monotonously, the press clanked on, those two Texans watching the sweating printers now as if hypnotized. The pile of papers grew. Two thousand, three, then four thousand!

Early sunlight struck through the dusty window panes. Will's goal was a paper for every man at railhead. A paper to be passed out gratis with the compliments of the *Sentinel*—and to hell with the price!

Five thousand! Will was gaunt-eyed and weary and old Pie was reeling on his feet when the girl turned from the hot stove and called them to breakfast. The job was done! There remained now but to distribute the sheets and to wait for

the violent aftermath to tear them apart.

THEY were still eating when John Talliaferro came in to look at his patient. He was openly pleased to find Wick conscious, equally as displeased to find his pulse high and his fever running.

"I must get you outa here," he grumbled, running his eyes around the room. "Too many people here and too much excitement. You mustn't let yourself get excited, man."

"Not excited," denied the Texan. "Worried."

"You're going to get well," said Talliaferro. "You've got nothing to worry about."

"No?" Alhorn handed him a copy of the paper. "Read that, suh, and you'll understand how I feel, lyin' here wounded and weak. I'd give a year of my life, yes, my whole life, to be standing on my two good feet with my six shooter loose in my holster."

The room fell deathly silent while the gambler read, for Talliaferro belonged to the Big Tent. He was one of the company of Noah Gauze, against whom this expose was directed. Moreover, the thing he was reading was the opening of an old sore into which Will Vining was pouring salt and rubbing it deep.

The silence held until Talliaferro had perused the entire sheet. Then, with sudden savagery, he wadded the paper between his hands and cast it from him He came to his feet, twin spots of red burning in his cheeks, his hot glance flickering to Will

"You fool!" he rasped. "You unutterable fool! You won't last five minutes after this hits the street. Damn you for a busybody, Vining, stirring up public antipathy for the few nickels it brings your paper. Because I chose to treat Alhorn, you seize upon the fact I am more of a doctor than a gambler. I warned you against it and trusted to your honor to respect my wishes. You've betrayed me, Vining, just as you may be betraying Noah Gauze. By God, man, I can't be a doctor, you understand? I won't be! Life is a gamble; death is a gamble, but if a doctor gambles, staking his last blue chip on a chance to save a human life, they crucify him if he loses. I can't stand that, so I'll go on gambling. . . ."

Will broke into it, matching the man's own savagery. "By your own words, you confess to being a coward, Talliaferro," he said loudly. "So am I. But what I can't stand is to go on being one. So I'm going to print the truth. And before you criticize me, Talliaferro, take a good look inside yourself. The magic in your fingers is a responsibility, Talliaferro. If you run away from it—you're yellow!"

"To hell with you!" raged Talliaferro and, white-faced, he spun on his heel and lunged from the room.

The long silence was broken at last by old Pie as he mused pleasurably, "Good crops come from planting fertile seeds in rich ground. Looks to me like we're gonna have a bumper crop in Laramie." He turned twinkling eyes to Will Vining. "Boss, whatever has become of the editor of the *Cheyenne Sentinel?* You remember, that gentle, timid fellow I used to work for."

Will found it easy to grin. He, too, wondered what had become of the Will Vining he had lived with, so long and unprofitably.

Now, with breakfast done, Will went out to rouse the cripples who distributed his paper. This was not regular publishing day and he would have to search them out, each one. An hour later he was back in the office with ten of them. He divided the papers, pressed a dollar into the hand of each man and ruefully watched them start the fateful distribution.

Terribly weary and caught in the backwash of an emotional letdown, Will went to his desk, slumped heavily into his chair

and dropped his head upon his arms. He wanted to sleep, to forget it all, but he knew that was one thing that would be denied him. He could not sleep. He might never again—and wake up alive.

His pulse throbbed and his nerves grew taut as fiddle strings. He dared not look ahead. Sick in body and mind, he became conscious of a presence at his side. Gentle fingers touched his forehead, ran soothingly back through his hair. Gay Alhorn's voice was in his ear.

"Don't worry, Will," she cautioned. "If courage is its own reward, this will come out all right. Right or foolish, you've done a brave thing."

Gratefully, Will found her fingers, pressed them. Then she had returned to the inner room and Will was lifting his eyes to the man entering the front portal.

John Talliaferro stood there, cold sober but with the stiff formality of mein that hints of long and steady drinking. There was a bruised look in his eyes, and no hint of his earlier annoyance.

"Will," he said, solemnly, "I have just taken my last drink of whiskey. If you need me, I will be in my room at the hotel. I'm done with Noah Gauze and his Big Tent. And while I shall always be a gambler, I judge, I'm finished with useless gambling. So help me God!"

THEN he was gone and, through the echoes of his bootheels on the walk, there struck the frightened murmurs of an aroused town. Momentarily, Will resisted the impulse to climb to his feet, savoring in that brief span of time the warning thought that, if nothing else than in Talliaferro, he had salvaged a life of great usefulness from out the dross of Noah Gauze's empire of destruction. That alone had justified his recklessness.

Nervously he rose, moved to the window to look out upon the excited street. Men stood in groups reading the startling import of that special edition of the *Sentinel*. But there was no group before the Big Tent. In his mind's eye, Will could see the denizens of that resort gathered about Noah Gauze and his lieutenants, planning their answer. Too well Will knew what that answer would be. And, instinctively, he eyed the second story windows of Madame Celeste's.

But there was no threat. The blinds were drawn, as always, upon the faithlessness lurking inside. Yet, Will reflected, it was a significant fact that, of the many groups mulling over his editorial, the only locations they avoided were the Big Ten and the *Sentinel*—and the ground between.

Unable to command calm, Will turned back to his desk. There he made note of a curious fact. The door to the inner room, usually closed, was now propped open with a weight. Wick Alhorn's cot had been moved so he could command a clear view of the outer portal.

The Texan lay propped up on pillows, his right hand under the covers which jutted out strangely from the edge of his cot. Will's grimace of fierce pleasure drew a nod and an answering grin from the buffalo hunter. Wounded as he was, Wick Alhorn was backing Will to his last white chip.

Will resumed his seat, prey to the same rising impatience that gripped the town. Hours dragged past. From the west came a work train, its whistle screaming shrilly. Then troops of General Casement's sunburned Irishmen were coursing along the street, entering here and there to drink and emerging quickly lest they miss some act in the impending drama.

Old Pie went out for his wonted battle, returning immediately to pour Will a long, stiff drink. It relaxed him and he must have slept in his chair. For the next he knew, the shadows were long and thin on the street, and Gay Alhorn was laying out his supper on the desk.

She said: "Whatever else you do, you'll

have to eat." And retired at once to the inner room, as if sensing his wish to be alone

Will hardly tasted the food, so troubled was he with the new thought that waiting for Gauze to act was going to be the worst torture of all.

The sun went down and twilight incroached upon the land. Will's overwrought nerves bounded as the steady, rhythmic beat of a man's tread neared the office door.

Will rose, ready and resigned. But this was not a visit of death. A calm, substantial man crossed the room to beam upon Will and offer him a fervent hand clasp. Sam Reed, General Superintendent of Union Pacific construction, had cooperated courteously with the *Sentinel* in the past. But never had Will Vining sensed the dominant personality of the man as he did now. It seemed to fill the dusky room

"Vining," he began, "you have surprised us all. We railroad men have hoped for a man who would lead the fight against these slinking rats who prey upon our workers in every town. We have hoped, of course, that such a man would have the backing of the *Sentinel*. But to find that leadership is in the *Sentinel* itself makes our pleasure all the more keen. Let me tell you, sir, that the entire resources of our road are behind you and always at your disposal. If I can do anything to further your campaign, Vining, call on me. More power to you. I have just come from General Dodge. He asked me specially to convey to you his compliments."

He wrung Will's hand, turned and left the office. And for long moments, Will gave himself over to full appreciation of this unexpected encouragement. In his hunger for kindness and sympathy, he clung to that thrill until darkness came. Even though he knew, down deep in his soul, that when he needed help there would be no time to call upon Sam Reed and General Dodge. When Gauze struck it would be swift, unexpected, furtive. Just like the shape that glided now out of the gloom and in through the office door.

WILL tipped over his chair as he came up, bracing himself for the bitter inevitable. It was Ed Peril he faced, Gauze's personal bodyguard. The man's fingers brushed the butt of his holstered gun and his venomous eyes were almost phosphorescent in the half gloom of the office.

He was scornfully humorous. "Hello, my brave bucko!" he purred. "How's tricks?"

"Hello, Peril," said Will. "What do you want?"

"It ain't what I want, Vining," hummed the gunman, "or it would soon be taken care of. It's what Noah Gauze wants."

"Well?" said Will

"He wants you at the Big Tent, Vining, right away. He wants to have a friendly drink with you and talk things over, man to man. Get your hat, bucko, an' I'll show you the way to our little place. C'mon!"

Will wanted to refuse but, with the bitter reflection that there is more to courage than the will to be brave, he said: "All right," and reached for his hat.

The low murmur of voices from the inner room came to a sudden ending and Old Pie was in the door between, cocking the twin barrels of a shotgun that yawned cavernously at Ed Peril.

"What Noah Gauze wants, boss," he said, "ain't so important now. You don't need to go unless you want to."

"No, Will!" The girl's voice came insistently over Pie's shoulder. "Don't go over there."

"But I want to go," Will heard himself saying, and wished that Pie had never flashed the gun. Ed Peril would not forget it. "This business is between me and

Noah Gauze. It's nothing I can continue to hide from. Lead out, Peril."

Peril eyed him strangely, then shrugged and turned about. Like a lamb being led to slaughter, Will Vining followed him into the street. There was a rattle of hoofs as a horseman flashed past with a laughing hail.

"So long, Ed!" he sang out. "I'll be seein' yuh!"

Ed Peril answered his salute. "Good luck, Mug!" and followed the man's going with his eyes.

It was Mug Bezdek, the bushwhacker who had shot Wick Alhorn and whose name Will had played up so prominently in the special edition. And Will felt a grim pleasure in the knowledge that he had thrown at least a little fear into the arrogant organization of Noah Gauze.

CHAPTER FIVE

Crawl or Die!

THERE had been many killings in the Big Tent, but the veteran followers of the westering rails had never seen the big saloon and gambling joint as it was when Ed Peril led Will Vining through the door. The place was well filled, yet so still was the interior the striding of the two men sounded thunderously on the splintery, wooden floor.

A muted gasp greeted their entrance and two hundred pairs of eyes watched the gunman lead Will to the bulky, solid form at the end of the long bar. Two hundred pairs of ears heard Noah Gauze say:

"Welcome, Vining, to the Big Tent. What are you drinking?"

With a boldness occasioned by a fatalistic acknowledgment of doom, Will managed a smile and said: "When I drink, Mister Gauze, I drink good whiskey—with gentlemen. Right now I'm not drinking."

Again that muted gasp from the crowd. Anger burned in Noah Gauze's dark cheeks, anger he controlled by an obvious mighty effort. He moved along the rail, so close Will felt the heat of the man's breath on his cheek.

In a tone so low that only the two of them could possibly have heard, Gauze said: "A very, very interesting story you told today in your paper, Vining. A pretty little fairy tale to amuse the children. Being a public spirited citizen, I always like to cooperate in the building of an enterprise like the *Sentinel*. Feel free to use my name any way you like to make your paper a success. But don't attack me, Vining, without letting me know you are acting in fun. I called you here so you might tell these good people you were only funning—have your little joke." His voice became a hiss. "Come on, Vining, get out there and crawl . . . or by God I'll kill you now!"

In Will Vining's mind was the image of Gay Alhorn's face, the clean-strained courage of her buffalo hunting brother and the new-won respect of old Pie. Inspiring him was the redemption of John Talliaferro, the open admiration of Sam Reed and the compliments of General Dodge, the great railroad builder. No, somehow he couldn't crawl before those things. And as for the other choice—it was the heritage of all men. He spoke his thought aloud.

"Why put off the matter, Gauze?" And he drove his fist squarely into the face of his enemy.

The blow snapped Noah Gauze's head back. Surprised and caught off guard, the saloonman staggered backward, clutching at the bar edge. And surprising, even to himself, Will Vining found himself following in, his arms working like pistons as he smashed the man with a flurry of blows that drove him to the floor.

Standing over Gauze, Will was gripped by a mad intoxication. His mouth was powder dry and in his ears was the raucous roar of the watchers that seemed to swell

the sides of the place and lift the canvas roof from its timbers.

Gauze's arms were upflung against further punishment, his eyes writhing with fear as he bawled desperately:

"Ed! Boomer! He's tryin' to kill me! Take care of him!"

Will spun, flattening against the bar front. He saw Ed Peril's cruel glance as he threw his hand to the butt of his gun, heard Boomer's hoarse croak as he came flatfooted forward.

"Not that, Ed! Vining ain't heeled. I'll pistol-whip the skunk!"

HE SLID toward Will, his head hunched between his great shoulders, his heavy arms akimbo and fingers splayed. "Not satisfied with spreadin' your lies over your yellow sheet!" he rapped, "you gotta come in here looking up trouble. Well, you come to the right place, shorthorn. I'm gonna take you apart and throw the chunks into the street. You need to be taught manners!"

Will braced himself. One hand went to grasp, as a weapon, a half-filled whiskey bottle on the bar, for he had interviewed the sorry victims of more than one similar outburst of Boomer's savagery. A muttering ran through the crowd. Then, from out their midst, flashed the slender figure of a pale girl in silk and spangles. Her name was Utah, she was the singer of the Big Tent.

"No, Boomer! No, no! Not him!" She flung herself before the bully.

With a single sweep of his great arm, Stull hurled her from him, driving her backward into a huddled heap upon the floor. Her shrill scream knifed the singing tension of the room, and it carried a warning for Will.

"Get out, Vining! Get out, you hear me! They're going to kill you!"

Then someone had clapped a hand over her mouth and Boomer was reaching for Will. But the things he had seen and heard sent a madness through Will Vining, robbing him of all restraint.

He dropped the bottle, hooked his elbows over the bar. His feet swung up, cocked and straightened. His boots, propelled by every ounce of his clean-lived strength, drove squarely into Boomer's middle. Like twin battering rams the blow drove the wind from the bouncer's lungs, doubled him up and hurled him back upon his heels until he fetched up at a table, upended it and fell in a crash of splintering furniture and spinning poker chips. The pistol fell from his hand.

Seemingly Boomer had no wind to rise, though plenty to emit a bawling plea: "Help! You seen what he done, Ed? Well—git him!"

Aroused and belligerent, Will Vining turned toward this new menace, a crash of flesh against flesh in his ears. And strangely, he found an end to the menace of Ed Peril's gun. The pistol was spinning in the air. Ed Peril's knees were buckling, his face a bloody mask as he writhed downward. And planted over him was the solid, glowering figure of Mallet Murphy, Casement's boss track-layer.

"No yez don't, ye back-stabbin' bucko!" he roared. "We'll have none av that. 'Tis a fair fight between them two b'ys we'll be after havin'. . . . With me boots for the man what says different. Make a ring, me paddies, so the b'ys kin fight without trippin' over the rats."

A great roar surged upward. A ring formed, and heavy, toil-hardened hands were lifting Boomer to his feet, shoving him roughly into the arena. The man was still shocked and Will was smart enough to know that if he was to have any chance at all with the giant, it would be now. He went to work, hurling himself at Boomer with pistoning arms.

They came together with a crash, with Will conscious of only two things—the tremendous roaring in his ears and the hateful, distorted face of Boomer floating be-

fore him. Then that roaring was gone and that face had faded into a dull, red blaze.

WILL VINING knew no science and whatever he did was purely instinctive. His anger told him he must keep hitting, hitting, hitting. His outraged nerves warned him against stabbing pains that shot along his arms, and the shock that repeatedly surged through him. But his will told him to keep fighting. The salty taste of blood was on his lips and his own voice was in his ears, cursing, sobbing and challenging.

The red haze lifted, but Will's numbed arms were still working. He was in the grip of a strong hand that pulled him backward, step by step. And Murphy was bellowing in his ear.

"Take it easy, me bold bucko! Take it easy! After all, yez have nearly killed the man. Ye've tamed him, be gob! An' if I know the color of his stripe, he'll niver lift his bloody dukes again. Here, drink this."

The stink of whiskey was in Will's throat, making him choke. But it pulled him together, dispelled the fog that blinded him. Through bruised and battered eyes, he glared about at staring, admiring faces. And for the first time in his life he had a sense of looking down upon the tallest one of them.

Somewhere in the maelstrom of that combat, he had been born again. He barked: "Where is that girl?"

Mallet Murphy said: "Girl? What girl, me bucko?"

"The singer that warned me. The one they call Utah."

Someone pointed to a door and Will was striding toward it. One of Noah Gauze's henchmen moved out to intercept him.

"Don't go in there," he warned.

Will laughed, struck the man down and Casement's Irishmen were pressing back the beginnings of a general conflict. Will surged through the door, stood before a half score of frightened girls clustered about one who sat in a chair, sobbing.

Utah stared strangely at the bloody figure who paused before her. "You?" she asked, weakly. "They didn't—?"

"Get your things," Will snapped. "You're getting out of here."

The girl shook her head, frightened. "No! If I dared to leave here, Noah Gauze would—"

Will broke in: "If you dare to stay here, Noah Gauze will kill you. This is your chance to get out. Come on!"

Sudden confidence took hold of her. She nodded, grabbed an armful of clothes from a hook and was ready. It was cold outside and one of the girls handed Will a coat

"Don't let her come back into this, Mister Vining," she said. "She's a good girl —too good for this sort of thing."

Almost tenderly, Will slipped the coat around Utah, linked his arm in hers. Then he was pacing her across the barroom, through two lines of staring men formed by Noah Gauze's minions on the one side, Casement's Irishmen on the other. Mallet Murphy strode truculently behind them, daring the lightning to strike.

Thus Will Vining brought the girl, Utah, to the office of the *Sentinel*.

CHAPTER SIX

Fighting Man's Way

WITH the strange telepathy of frontier towns, word had preceded Will. And a warm-eyed, excited little group awaited him in his office. Old Pie's eyes were boyishly bright and he champed vigorously on an enormous cud.

"Whoopie!" he yelped. "Hurray for the power of the press!"

From the rear room, Wick Alhorn's voice lifted in a rebel yell more eloquent than words. There was thankfulness in Gay Alhorn's eyes, a pleased smile on her

lips and a shyness in her mein that Will had not observed before.

"Thank heaven, Will, you're safe," she said.

The only one in that room who seemed to have his emotions under control, was John Talliaferro. His face was composed, his mouth firm as he flipped open a black bag and motioned Will to a seat.

"Vining," said he, "you look like you'd collided with one of Casement's work trains. Sit down here and let me fix you up. Miss Alhorn, bring in that basin of warm water."

But Will did not submit his battered features at once. Behind him, the girl Utah cowered beside bulky Mallet Murphy. She was more frightened, if anything, than she had been under the Big Tent. Will drew her forward.

"Folks," he said, "this is Utah, a singer. She risked her life to help me, tonight. And I've brought her over where she'll be safe. Take care of her, Gay. Find a place for her to hang her clothes."

"No, no!" the singer cried. "I mustn't do that. I'll go away somewhere, but I can't stay here with you. Don't you understand; I'm from the Big Tent. . . ."

Gay Alhorn came to her, drew her close. "There's no reason at all why you can't stay here," she said, gently. "It isn't where one has been that counts; it's where they're going."

The girl wept on her shoulder as Gay led her into the back room. And from there they all heard Wick Alhorn soothe her in his Texas drawl.

"Don't you ail cry like that, honey. You're among friends, safe as in God's pocket."

Now Mallet Murphy, twisting his hat as he stood nervously by the door, caught Will's fingers and crushed them in his huge palm. His arrogant swagger had given way to boyish embarrassment.

"Yez are a fightin' man afther me own heart, my bucko. Shure, and if it's trouble those rats'll be makin' for yez, 'tis Mallet Murphy an' his mates who'll see yez get fair play. Now good night to yez, me bye; I'll be after roundin' up me paddies."

When the Irishman was gone, John Talliaferro forced Will into a chair, and for long moments ministered to his hurts. After he had finished, he put a white pill in a cup of water.

"Drink this," he said. "It will buck you up."

Will needed it. He drank. And in an incredibly short time, his lids were heavy and he was fighting drowsiness. He lifted his eyes and started to protest to the erstwhile gambler, noting the man's sly grin and a gradual fading of his features. Will slept.

When Will awoke, the night had passed and the sun was high. He shifted under his blankets, found himself stiff and aching in every muscle. For one long moment, he lay there, staring at the ceiling,

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reviewing the nightmare of the evening before, savoring it.

He waited for the return of old worries, but they seemed far behind him. He shifted his eyes downward. Someone had stretched a blanket partition across the room. Framed in the opening of that drape was Utah, the singer, looking fresh and bright and rested after a night's sleep.

She did not notice his awakening. She was looking fixedly at Wick Alhorn on the cot beside Will. And he was looking at her. In that exchange of glances, Will sensed something that made the room brighter for its being there; the reflection of an emotion as stirring as the clasp of hands or the caress of a woman's lips.

Deeply stirred, Will turned his eyes across the empty cot to his left, to see old Pie regarding him pleasurably from the outer room. And the pleasing picture of Gay Alhorn preparing breakfast at the stove.

Old Pie cackled a greeting: "Morning, boss! Yesterday at this time, the enemy bloomed in full flower. Last night you looked upon them and this morning they are ours. How's the head man of Laramie this morning?"

"I feel used up and mighty lucky," grinned Will and rolled out of the blankets to pull on his boots.

Gay Alhorn left her work at the stove and came to him. One look at her eyes told him that she hadn't slept, knew also that the old fears he had abandoned she had taken for her own. She came to the point.

"You were lucky last night," she said insistently. "Very, very lucky. It has all come out better than any of us could have believed. Knowing the track gang is behind you, it is not likely Gauze will dare move against you. You won your fight now and have pointed the way. Those Gauze has preyed upon should carry the burden from now on. Please rest upon your laurels and don't crowd your luck too far."

Old Pie came from the outer room to plant himself before her. "He can't do that, ma'am," he protested. "Things don't work that way. Once a leader assumes the burden, he must pack it until he drops —or quits. To lie down and ask the other fellow to finish this job is only a weak compromise. The fight is only started."

Almost savagely, Gay disputed him. "Don't talk like that! Why should Will be the one to fight them? They'll be eager now, hungry for his blood. He's done enough!"

"It's not enough," countered the old typesetter, "till Gauze and his kind are licked, till every man in this town is safe from killer's guns. Will's the leader now, can't you see that? Better fitted than anyone else, because he's got no one depending on him but himself."

The girl's lips moved: "No one depending on him. . . ." She turned her eyes to Will with an intensely questioning glance. Then, as if she had read something there, she flared: "That is not so!" and walked back to the stove to serve the breakfast.

IN THE days that followed, the little group in the *Sentinel* office stayed close to the plant, hardly knowing which way to walk with the gage of battle withdrawn and the Big Tent strangely quiet.

During those days, Will worked on the next issue of the paper, placed squarely between the fires of the counter arguments of old Pie and Gay Alhorn. In answer to old Pie's demands, Will undertook more than once to write the story of that night in the Big Tent. Giving it up each time because it smacked of a bid for personal glory.

"You're the press!" old Pie reminded him. "Your attitude should rise above personal issues."

"You've done enough," Gay kept din-

ning at him. "Don't invite them to kill you. If anything happens to you, I—I don't know what I'll do!"

They were alone, and she dropped her glance and let her words run out. Will caught her hands, shaken by an overwhelming emotion. After that, it was an easy thing for her to handle him.

He swung into the preparation of the paper with a vigor, closing his eyes to old Pie's constant grumbling. Sheet after sheet he handed the typesetter, until the proof came out.

Then Will said, "Run it!"

It was not an issue to stir any particular pride in Will Vining, but it was safe. And, what was more important to him now, it pleased Gay Alhorn

Wick Alhorn was beginning to try his strength and he and Utah were constantly together. The very fact that the buffalo hunter was on his feet contributed to the next step in the inevitable conflict.

The Texan maintained that he was fully capable of taking his hand at the press, of earning his keep. It left Will free to enjoy one of the pleasantest days of his life, squiring Gay Alhorn by work train to the rail head, where they viewed the hectic operations of the greatest project the nation had ever known

Winding into the blue distance stretched the thin scar of the grade. Dust rose in countless bombs where mule teams and skinners toiled. Bridge crews were clustered at the coulees, chips flying from their broadaxes and adzes. The road, paralleling the grade, writhed with scores of wagons, transporting timber and ties to be piled in little cubes along the right-of-way. Streams of empties were coming back.

A work engine puffed and snorted, moving the train ahead a rail length at a time. Singing and swearing, Mallet Murphy's Irish tracklayers swarmed over the flat-cars. Squads of twelve shouldering under each rail and shuffling ahead to place them on the ties. Soldiers loitered on the guns, searching the skylines for attacking Indians.

Sledge-men fell in behind them to set spikes and pound them home. Four spikes to each tie! Three strokes to each spike, "Or make way for a man!" The rails seemed to walk across the prairie in jerky strides. Chaos dovetailed into perfect patterns of efficiency and genius. Endless turmoil blending into the harmony of a marching song of unsung heroes who were leaving a deathless monument to their memory.

Intrigued by the immensity of it all, Will and Gay stood watching. Pressed close to him, Gay said: "Doesn't it make you proud, Will, that you could have played even a small part in a thing as huge as this?"

For some moments, Will didn't answer as he stared bleakly into the distance. "Strangely," he said at last, "it doesn't affect me like that, Gay. Look at them work. Men swarming like ants, yet not a one in the way of another. Each doing his part, or stepping aside for one who can." He turned to face her, his eyes alight, "Gay, suppose that gang should lay a rail, then sit down and say, 'I've done enough?' "

"Oh!" the girl gasped. "They couldn't do that. Mallet Murphy would fire them off the job."

"That's just it," said Will. "But there's nobody to fire me off the job, is there? A job that I've quit, right when the going was toughest. I listened to you, Gay, because I wanted to listen, because I didn't want to hurt you, because—I love you. But it was wrong—dead wrong. I'm going back, Gay, and change that set-up. I'm going to print the news!"

Strangely, she was smiling at him, gripping his hand in both of hers. "Heaven help us all," she breathed, "but I'm glad you said that, Will. So very glad. I know it was me who held you back. I was selfish, unwilling to run the risk of losing

you just when I had found you. Knowing all the while that I would have loved you more if you had sat down on me and done as old Pie wanted you to. Come. . . . And I'll work all night if necessary to help you change it!"

THE work train crawled back along the prairie. An eon of time seemed to pass before Will lifted Gay down from the engine and hurried her back toward the *Sentinel* office. They had not gone half way when Will was suddenly aware that something had happened. As was usual on publishing day, men stood in groups along the street, perusing the new issue. But this was not publishing day—not until tomorrow morning! What was old Pie thinking of?

"We're too late!" mourned Will and led the way at a run.

They darted in the rear of the newspaper office. Wick stood in the middle of the room, stern-faced, buckling his gun belt around his narrow middle. Utah, the singer, was saying in a frightened tone: "Don't go out there, Wick! Please! You'll get hurt! They won't dare harm old Pie!"

Both flushed guiltily as Will and Gay burst into the room. Will snapped: "What's the meaning of this? Why is the paper out? Where's Pie?"

"He left an hour ago for a bottle," muttered Wick, dropping his glance. "I was just fixing to see what he was up to."

Even while Will's mind was reaching for the answer to this premature publishing of the paper, his eyes fell upon a copy spread upon the table. It was not Will's sheet at all. It was another abbreviated issue—the second special edition of the *Sentinel*. It carried some of the articles Will himself had written. But framed between them, with lurid borders and scarehead type under old Pie's byline, was the full story of Will Vining's invasion of the Big Tent, his humiliation of Noah Gauze and his crushing defeat of Boomer Stull.

Old Pie had told it bravely, mincing no words. From his picture of Gauze's defeat that night, Pie had drawn stirring conclusions. This, he wrote, was the entering wedge designed to sweep ruthlessness and indecency from Rag City. He called upon all right thinking people to get behind the honest leadership of Will Vining. He challenged Noah Gauze to show his hand again, promising that when he did the decent citizens of Laramie would rise up, tear down the Big Tent over his ears and run him and his kind out of the railhead metropolis forever.

Will's displeasure was held in leash by the drama of the writing. Never had he read such a masterful assembling of words, nor so pure an essence of truth. But Pie was out there somewhere, drinking himself into sodden carelessness, becoming an easy prey for Gauze's outraged killers.

White of face, Will dropped the paper and spat: "The old fool! I must get him back here!"

Then he was starting for the front door with Utah keeping Wick from following. Wick dashed across the portal, hit the walk and came to a sudden pause—with the bitter knowledge he was too late.

Magically, the street had cleared. From every doorway strained faces peered toward the Big Tent. Directly across from the saloon, old Pie had just stepped off the walk, to face Ed Peril, just emerging from the Tent. Through the sudden stillness, Peril's voice struck damningly.

"Maybe the *Sentinel's* right, Pie!" he snarled. "But I'm damned if we're taking an ol' booze-h'ister's word for it!"

"Then you're damned!" said old Pie and strode directly toward the man. Head up, shoulders back and an almost gay smile on his face.

Ed Peril laughed and drew. He shot Pie twice. The old typesetter shuddered, threw his hands to his chest and doubled over. Will Vining groaned and cried out.

As if old Pie had heard that cry, he

straightened mechanically. From beneath his coat, he whipped a long horse pistol, leveled it and shot once. The bullet nearly tore Ed Peril's head off. They fell together, the cushioning dust of the street shrouding them both. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

When a Town Goes to War

NOW through the hush succeeding the gunfire came the voice of the aroused town. Every building seemed to disgorge men. Magically the street filled. Will Vining saw and heard as if in a dream, rooted to the walk, incapable of thought or movement. The thing had been so sudden, so unexpected, so certain an aftermath to the thing he had started and might never be able to finish.

Bitterly, he thought that should have been his body instead of that of old Pie's they were picking up now. The crowd came with a rush, forcing Will back into the office and laying the old-timer at his feet.

It surprised Will to find the printer yet alive, gasping a little and looking up at him with a wistful, stricken smile upon his face. Will knelt beside him, dashing tears from his eyes. All he could say was: "Why?" over and over again. "Why?"

Someone in the crowd said: "No secret about why, Vining. That article of his was a slap in the face to Gauze. And for boot, old Pie palms a gun and goes down there asking for it. What could he expect?"

Will hardly heard him. He was looking at the stricken old fellow he had come to love like a father and watching his lips.

"Don't feel bad, Will," old Pie murmured. "I'm an old, old man. Much older than you think. Eighty-two I'd be, my next birthday." Pride touched his features. "Never believe it, would you? Well, in those years I've lived three lives. Why should I feel sorry about going, like this? In my time I've set up great stories, son, written by great men. Stories by Poe, the best drinking man I've ever met. Poems by Whittier and Longfellow. Working in a rumbling cart, I set up the story of the burning of Washington by the British in Eighteen twelve. I printed Lincoln's Gettysburg address and the story of his assassination. I've lived through stirring times, boy, setting up stirring tales—all written by other men."

Pain stabbed him and for a long minute he struggled with it, his face beading with sweat. Then it passed and his eyes cleared. "All my life, I've wanted to write a story, Will. A story to stir men's hearts and to start the wheels rolling. This was my chance, Will, and I couldn't resist it. The full burden will fall upon your shoulders, son, which is as it should be. It's what you've needed; don't shirk it. If you do, you may still have this fine girl of yours, but not with honor, Will—not with honor." He shifted his eyes to the face of the weeping Gay Alhorn who stood near him.

"You know that already, don't you, my dear?"

Gay nodded and choked: "Yes! We both know it now, too late for you."

A smile of peace settled upon old Pie's face and he said nothing as he continued to look at the girl. Thus it was some moments before they realized old Pie was dead.

Gay Alhorn wept openly and Will knew the anguish of one who has lost a tried and trusted friend. The crowd filtered away. At Will's choked request, four men carried all that was mortal of old Pie to the undertaking establishment.

NUMBED with grief and torn with a thousand bitter self-recriminations, Will Vining slumped into his chair, buried his face on his arms. Gay stood beside him, her arm flung across his shoulder to comfort him. Wick was close behind them, his face a dark cloud, his fingers toying

with the polished butt of his gun. He was nursing a deadly anger and not knowing how to expend it. The girl, Utah, clung to Wick's arm, crying softly.

The town had grown dreadfully still, nursing a hush that exaggerated the fusillade of shots that broke through it. To the four in the *Sentinel* office, it was a tonic that took them away from themselves. Will came to his feet, and then they were at the window

Racing across the dusty roadway, they saw a dancehall girl from the Big Tent, running like a deer. Behind her, framed in the doorway of the big saloon, was a man leveling his gun for the final shot to bring her down.

Wick Alhorn bit off a muffled curse, flung open the door. His gun swept up magically, spoke from the hip. The gunman at the Big Tent was blown backward and vanished behind the swinging doors. Then the scantily clad dancehall girl was darting into the *Sentinel* office, white of face, her eyes wide with terror.

Utah called: "Nellie!" and caught the girl in her arms, held her there for a brief moment of sobbing, as she begged: "What is it, Nellie? What is it?"

With an effort, the girl got hold of herself, lifted her eyes to Will. "Mister Vining," she said with a gallant attempt at calmness, "you must get out of here, all of you, or be killed. Noah Gauze is calling for showdown. He has organized and armed every man he controls in this town and he's called in his hunters. Those who work for him and those who are afraid to deny him. First he aims to kill you and burn out the *Sentinel*. Then he's moving against every man who has not knuckled to him. Hurry! He won't be long!"

"How many men has he?" asked Will

The girl looked puzzled. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe five hundred. A lot of them!"

Wick Alhorn said: "Let 'em come, the buzzards!"

But Gay was quick to deny him. "No, Wick! We can't face so many. Come on, Will, let's get out of here while we can."

Will's mind was racing. As if the printed words were before his eyes, he saw old Pie's challenge to Noah Gauze:

> . . . Noah Gauze, your days are numbered! Sometime soon, you will lash out in desperation and the decent people of Laramie City will rally behind the leadership of Will Vining, tear down your Big Tent over your ears and run you and your kind from Rag City forever. I dare you to show your hand. . . .

Crisply, Will said: "Wick, get these girls down to Sam Reed's car. They'll be safe there!" And then he was leading the way at a run.

Gay cried: "Will! Where are you going? Wait!"

Will flung back, "I'll be gone two hours! Maybe less. See you then!" And he was legging it as fast as he could travel for the great scattered piles of rails and ties, boxcar offices and living quarters that marked the railroad headquarters.

A SWITCH engine was bucking cars, preparatory to pulling out for railhead, when Will dashed into Sam Reed's office. The superintendent came to his feet, staring. Will said: "Reed, you told me the railroad was behind me in the business of cleaning up this camp."

"Yes," said Reed.

"All right! Get me an engine—quick!"

"An engine?" echoed Reed. "What do you mean?"

"There isn't time to explain. Get me an engine!"

It was an order, and Reed, an old army man, knew the futility of argument in an emergency. He shrugged, led the way out of the office. Thus, within five minutes, Will was bracing himself in the cab of a hurtling locomotive that careened along the unballasted roadway like a ship crossing an angry sea.

Mile after mile, with the throttle thrown wide, the fireman was in a lather of sweat as he heaved coal into the open firebox, while the engineer leaned halfway out the window with a steady pull upon the whistle cord. He had a wife in Laramie who was in danger of becoming a widow if the unleveled rails gave way. But he had learned the story briefly from Will. So the man's heart was in this race now and the devil could take him along with the other innocents if he lost.

Black smoke flattened out behind them. Steam screamed from the pistons. Drivers pounded the uneven rails like sledge strokes. The iron horse swayed and pitched, the flanges screaming as they struck a curve. Twenty-five miles in thirty-five minutes—a new record for the U. P! The engineer was laughing wildly as he shot the throttle home and brought the fuming monster into the yards at railhead.

The screaming whistle fetched Mallet Murphy on the run. Will Vining swung down and dashed to meet him. His words were few and crisp, but sharply to the point.

Mallet Murphy's roar swept through the turmoil of construction: "Tis a layoff I'll be after givin' ye, me hearties! All ye'll be needin' is yore fightin' tools and a thirst for free whiskey when we've taken Noah Gauze out av his rat nest. Pile onto them flats, me b'ys. Ireland's goin' tuh war!"

Every one of those brawny tracklayers had been provided with a gun and ammunition against possible Indian raids. But numbers of those within hearing of Mallet Murphy's voice, scorned to catch up those weapons of death, preferring instead, the hickory handles out of their pickheads. An Irish fighting man knows no weapon the equal of a good shillelagh.

With a concerted rush and roar, the Micks swarmed like ants over the waiting freight cars. Mallet Murphy drew himself into the cab of the work train, Will following. The engine crew, in some doubt yet as to the meaning of this sudden move, started as the big Celt bawled: "Throw out that throttle, bucko! The track is clear and the reception committee is waitin'!"

"Thirty-five minutes it took us to come out," added Will. "See if you can beat it!"

The engineer, a truculent man, shook his head doggedly. "My orders are to pick up these empties, leave the train here and wheel back to Laramie at dawn. I'm workin' for Sam Reed."

He was talking to Mallet Murphy, a man of direct action. A roar escaped the Irishman's lips. "Workin' for Sam Reed, is it?" he bellowed. "Well, bejabbers, start workin' for him!" Even as he spoke, he caught the fellow by the seat of the pants and the nape of the neck and hurled him bodily off the engine. Then he pulled out the throttle.

THE locomotive stirred, the drivers spun, then caught. The train began to move with four flatcars of savagely yelling warriors behind, some brandishing guns; some pick handles. The engine gathered momentum and thundered along the rails. The trip was not made in thirty-five minutes, an extra five minutes being needed because of the drag of that heavy load.

When the engine wheezed to a stop before the Laramie station and disgorged its human freight, Wick Alhorn and John Talliaferro came running from Sam Reed's office. They were followed by the superintendent and two towering, bearded men—the Casement brothers, railroad contractors.

This untimely influx of their workers and the manner of their coming, brought scowls to the faces of the Casements and curses to their lips. But Sam Reed spoke sharply, authoritatively, halting any protest the construction chiefs might have made.

The reason for Sam Reed's firm handling of the situation was plain to Will

Vining now that he had time to notice. Strung along the tracks were soldiers, their guns at ready, staring toward the town where the ugly muttering of a mob struck through the hissing of the flames that enveloped the *Sentinel* office.

It made Will a little sad to contemplate the fate of that printing office, his stock of paper, his carefully guarded type and the old press.

But he was given scant time to indulge his sadness. Sam Reed was coming up, his lips compressed into a grim line, his eyes hard and glittering.

"Gauze has a thousand men up there, Vining," he was saying. "He has the town cowed, but I don't think he's fool enough to lead his bunch against U. P. property. As for your own interest," his eyes ran up that plume of smoke reaching into the sky, then to the impatient Irish trackmen clustered about, "five to one, that's pretty big odds."

Will Vining turned abruptly to Mallet Murphy. "Five to one," he said, seriously.

The big Celt only smiled at him, then ran his fierce glance around the circle of fighting Irishmen. "There'll be five of the spalpeens for each one of you!" he bellowed.

"Only five?" someone roared back at him. "Bejabbers, b'ys, then we got 'em outnumbered!"

Then they were marching, their steps shaking the ground. Moving faster, their heads settled solidly between their rock-like shoulders, their arms akimbo, their weapons tightly gripped. And it gave Will the greatest thrill of his life when they laid their strong hands upon him, pushed him into the van—a rugged acknowledgement that they were his men for the moment. Where he led, they would follow. He could not fail them.

Will was striding, seemingly pushed ahead by an increasing hurry from behind. Intoxication swept him, a gladsome courage he had never known before. And then he was aware of figures striding on either side of him. Wick Alhorn was at his right, his holster gun jutting from his fist, John Talliaferro to his left, his face a poker mask, a rifle held across his spare middle. Mallet Murphy treaded on Will's heels, and behind him a solid phalanx of grinning warriors that swept into Laramie's main street, filling it from walk to walk.

Yet of all this, the thing that touched Will most, was the ghostly thing that strode before them—the real leader of this gallant army—the deathless spirit of old Pie.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Dead Man Speaks

NOW a shrill yell of warning beat high from one of the mob that milled before the burning *Sentinel*. That yell whirled the mobsmen in their tracks and their lifting roar was a spine-tickling challenge as they surged to the fray.

Theirs was the balance of numbers. They filled the street from building to building. But in this narrow battleground, it was plain at once they could not use their numerical advantage.

Slowly, the two forces moved together. Then in Will Vining's ears was a strange bellowing that he came to recognize as his own voice, issuing insistent orders. "Come on, boys! Give them hell!"

He was breaking into a run, bawling primitive challenges as he sprinted ahead. For one brief moment, the tongues of men were silent and the slogging of pounding boots the only turmoil. The gap between the forces closed. Will Vining ducked under the vicious swing of a giant's fist, driving his shoulder hard into the man's middle and dumping him flat. Then his boots were churning the man's body as he surged across him.

There came the crash of rock-hard bodies smashing together, the muted blaring of guns, pickhandles rising and falling,

and men screaming hoarsely, crying out to God. Amid the curses, grunts and groans, dust rose from the beaten roadway so as to gloom the westering sun. Over all came the devil-cry of the mob and the wild, reckless roars of Casement's Irish as they drove through the ranks of the toughs, turned and came coursing back. Mallet Murphy's boys were having their fun.

It was all kaleidoscopic to Will Vining—a mad nightmare of bruising blows and unending conflict. And all the while his fists were pumping like pistons into human flesh. He lost all track of Wick, John Talliaferro and Mallet Murphy.

Something hit Will, knocked him to his knees. He rose blindly, went down again as a swinging bludgeon caught him across his left shoulder, numbing his arm. This time he did not rise at once, though he felt no pain. His vision had cleared and before him on the ground, seen through a chaos of flashing legs, lay the unmoving form of a man. There were many such, but this one had a pistol clenched in his nerveless hand

Fighting men trampled Will as he crawled toward that weapon, booting him off the line, crushing him into the dust. But on he went, knowing a glad thrill as he disengaged those stiffening fingers and rose with the gun in his fist. He dared not shoot, for friend and foe were mixed indiscriminately. So he used it as a bludgeon, lifting it and bringing it down, over and over again.

Will's arm came to ache with the agony of it. A press of struggling men forced him to the walk. He tripped, went down, came up again and was hurtled into a slot between buildings. He tried to win back into the fight, but a wall of Irishmen intervened. So Will legged it toward the back, figuring to come into the battle from another quarter

He tore around the rear corner of the structure, and came to a sudden pause. Not a rod away stood a saddled horse with a roll behind the cantle. And stepping from the rear door of the Big Tent, preparatory to mounting, was Noah Gauze himself.

THE saloonman's nervous eyes fell upon Will Vining, and he too halted, with a gun palmed and ready. Thus the two arch enemies of Laramie glared at one another across that interval. Looking into the eyes of this over-lord of Rag City evil, Will Vining had but one thought. How could he ever have been afraid of Gauze?

He said: "Rats always leave the sinking ship, Gauze. And the biggest rats always go first!"

Gauze's voice was toneless. "The bigger they are the smarter they are," he said, "or they wouldn't have grown big. I'm glad you showed up, Vining. My only regret was that you had escaped me in the shuffle. Once, when you were smart, we could have worked together. But you let old Pie poison you. And now—you'll get what he got!"

Will saw the man's heavy weapon rising. He remembered something old Pie had once said about hurry being the greatest foe of those who fight with guns. It was almost as if the old typesetter were speaking to him now. Deliberately, Will lifted his piece, rested it across his forearm.

Noah Gauze was shooting now, the snarl of his weapon a curse in Will's ears. And Noah Gauze was in a hurry, for Will knew none of the shock a bullet brings to a man when he is hit.

A heavy golden chain spanned Noah Gauze's ample middle. From the center of that chain swung a huge nugget, dug from the California sands in the days of Forty-Nine. It made a fine target, Will thought, as he aimed at the sheen of it.

Will loosed his first shot as Gauze emptied his gun. Something touched Will's leg as a premonition might touch the brain. But his own bullet had struck home. Noah Gauze stiffened, threw the loading gate of his weapon and, for a short

moment, worked desperately at ejecting the spent shells. Then, as if the whole matter were futile, tossed the weapon disdainfully aside, drew in a long breath and let it gust out of him.

Suddenly the man seemed to have lost stature and girth, and Will knew the horrifying experience of having killed a man. It gave him the answer to why he hadn't fired again, with Noah Gauze still on his feet.

Now the saloonman lifted his eyes, touched strangely with amusement at Will Vining's patent horror.

"Don't let it get you, Vining," he said, in almost a friendly tone. "It was just your lucky day. If anyone should feel sorry, let it be me who failed to keep you on my side. I may have had my faults, but even when I was bullying you the hardest to keep you in line, I was wondering how long you'd take it without striking back. Knowing all the time that when you did, I'd be in for trouble with a man so hell-fired tough, knowing I'd be hard put to whip him. I don't know what old Pie gave you to start you off this way. But whatever it is, hang on to it. It's priceless, Vining."

He turned, as if to reenter the Big Tent. Then he pitched forward, fell flat and lay still.

How long he stood there looking down at the body, Will Vining was never to know. He had killed a man, but the horror of it gripped him less than that pitiful speech, even as he was dying. Noah Gauze had made it such a personal thing as to almost make it hurt. Never before had Will looked at it in just that way.

Standing there, he had the strangest feeling that old Pie was touching him on the shoulder. Then all the sting of it was gone, and he was glad. He turned about, limping a little now from the slight wound in his leg, to make his way again to the street.

The fight was over. The toughs were in full flight, streaming across the prairie with squads of Casement's Irishmen pursuing them. From somewhere, Mallet Murphy had obtained axes and his roars were filling the town as he directed another squad in the business of chopping down the supports of Madame Celeste's establishment. Another crew were stripping canvas from the Big Tent, laying the front wide open for the later rush of thirsty men drawn by the honey of free whiskey. This would be a big celebration tonight.

From somewhere came Sam Reed and Wick Alhorn to arouse Will from his studious contemplation of the miracle. The superintendent of the U. P. was grinning, folding Will's hand in a fervent clasp.

"Vining," he enthused, "my thanks, and the thanks of the Union Pacific are small pay for the thing you have brought to pass. Under your leadership, the toughs and agitators who preyed upon our men are gone. It will speed our progress immeasurably." Then, as Will's eyes turned toward the charred ruin of the *Sentinel:* "Don't grieve about your loss, Vining. The railroad needs the *Sentinel.* So that you may consolidate your leadership and the gains we've made today, I have already wired Kansas City. The next train from the east will carry a supply of paper, a new press and all the equipment necessary to publish again."

It removed a grave doubt from Will's mind, and he thanked Reed fervently, watched him stride away. But trouble still walked with Will. He looked about and said to Wick Alhorn, "John Talliaferro—is he . . ?"

Wick laughed, softly. "John Talliaferro is the busiest man in this town," said he, pridefully. "Look yonder!"

Will followed his pointing finger. And there, where men carried in a stream of maimed and wounded fighters, the wind swung a new sign in its bracket. Even at that distance, Will could read:

DOCTOR JOHN TALLIAFERRO
Physician and Surgeon

Will smiled, knowing a vast content.

* * *

IT WAS a gala celebration, that one they were holding at Promotory Point, on the bleak, wind-swept flats of western Utah. Here, where the rails of the Central Pacific and the U. P. were meeting to link the two remote shores of a vast continent, was gathered a mighty company of workers, officials, gallant gentlemen and fine ladies.

There had been brave speeches by ranking officers of the army, empire builders, powerful financiers and captains of industry. Flags had been waved, champagne drunk and cheers voiced for the heroes who, in a struggle of four long years, had flung the rails across countless miles of Indian-infested prairie and snow-choked blizzard passes. There remained now but the golden spike to drive to complete the gigantic task of linking a nation together.

The heads of the two great lines, their sledges gripped, were shaking hands now. Mallet Murphy, grinning from ear to ear, squatted at their feet, holding the shimmering bit of metal that would usher in a new era for the west. A hush fell over the crowd, broken by the voice of Sam Reed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "You have heard credit given where credit belongs. You have heard tribute paid to heroes, from the humblest of the track crews to the financiers, whose faith has made this road possible. To all of those, I must add one other name. The name of a man who, by his courage and leadership, has so inspired our men and dismayed those who preyed upon them, as to have speeded the coming of this day by many bitter, trying months. My friends, I give you Will Vining, editor of the *Sentinel!*"

A great roar lifted. The two locomotives, standing head to head, shook to the blast of their whistles. Strong hands seized Will, where he stood with his wife, Gay; with Wick Alhorn and his wife, Utah, and with proudly smiling Doctor John Talliaferro.

They rushed Will into the center and one of the greatest men of that age pressed a sledge into Will's hand and pointed to the golden spike. Mallet Murphy roared with laughter.

"Bear down on it, bucko, like yez did on Boomer Stull!"

Will didn't drive that spike, but he swung one lusty blow that started it home. There was glory enough for all—and this was glory enough for Will. This tribute, and the smiling girl, who was always to treasure with him the memory of a smashing sledge stroke that bridged a nation.

THE END

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A Partner To Die For!

By
John G. Pearsol

"It is here," said the Mex. "Under the board. And it is heavy. . . ."

By luck, fighting strength and iron will, Big Jim Silver had made his name a legend along the Border. How, then, could he bear to share any of that fame and glory with such a weakling as little Bill Clark—even though Bill was his partner and knew that Jim could do no wrong?

JIM SILVER was big framed, with massive shoulders that swaggered when he ploughed through the deep drifts. He had a big name, too. He had made a dozen fortunes, folks said, running guns into Mexico; being a general in the Mexican army; gambling and risking a fortune on the single turn of a card.

His name was legend along the Border. Most everybody believed that Jim could shoot straighter and faster than anybody else. If Jim Silver said he was going to do something, it was generally accepted that he would do it.

Now he was attempting something that very few men would have had the audacity to say they would do. He was trying to locate the lost mine they called Heffler's Dream.

Plenty of men had tried it, and they all had failed. In fact, so many had failed that it was considered folly to search for it. But Jim Silver had said he was going to find it.

He was in the high monutains, and the snow was deep, and little Bill Clark rode along behind him on his skinny nag, having a hard time keeping up with the long, seemingly tireless strides that Jim took as he bucked the snow drifts afoot.

If the folks who had talked about Jim Silver could have seen him now, they would have had a lot more to talk about. For here he was, ploughing ahead like a steam engine after his horse had fallen and broken a leg, his weaker partner riding behind him. Big Jim Silver, the great! Big Jim, the man who never had been whipped, the man who always got what he went after.

But Jim Silver was wondering if he was going to find Heffler's Dream. It was beginning to look as though he wasn't. It was beginning to look as though his name might be a laughing stock along the Border. So confidently had he announced that he'd find that fabled mine! So cocksure had he been that nobody had laughed when he'd said he would find it. He'd never failed before, but it was time to give up now. At last, after months of fruitless searching, big Jim Silver was getting his first licking.

His great legs, that drove so forcefully forward through the snow drifts, were tired leaden weights that he could hardly move. He was numb with cold. He was hungry and weak. His red-rimmed eyes looked out across the snow-drifted world and he wondered how long it would be till he fell, unable to rise again. Little Bill Clark would not be able to help. Bill was much too weak to lift Jim if he fell.

BILL CLARK was excess baggage to Silver, but he always liked to have a handyman around; somebody to run errands, to bring wood for a fire, somebody to tell Jim Silver what a hell of a swell fellow he was, to keep his ego high. That was music to his ears.

Like a hammer in Silver's breast, his heart pounded now. Dimly an inner voice tried to convince him that it was no use to fight further. Might as well freeze and starve right here as to freeze and starve a mile farther on. Then something black and square danced in Silver's eyes. A cabin!

Silver clenched his teeth and marched on toward it. The snow grew deeper. He knew that Bill Clark had not seen that cabin, or he would have shouted. But Silver could vision the picture he'd make marching toward it—Big Jim Silver, leading his little partner to safety. Big Jim Silver walking while his little partner rode. The doubts that had clouded his mind, the fears that had assailed him, would be his own secret. Bill would sing his praises again, and the occupant of that cabin would also sing his praises. That would take the edge off the fact that he had failed to find Heffler's Dream.....

So, for half an hour, he ploughed along, losing sight of the cabin now and then, until suddenly it was there below him.

Silver stopped at the edge of a bluff, waited till Bill Clark came beside him. He raised his hand to point and started to speak.

A sharp crack sounded beneath him. The earth gave way and he felt himself falling. He was suddenly blinded in a cloud of snow, buffeted by the flailing legs of Bill's struggling horse as he slid down into the ravine. He rose to his feet and looked up at a bare earthen cliff that had broken off under their combined weight. That bare earthen face of the cliff held

his eyes as though they were frozen there. For the dull glitter of yellow metal ran diagonally down its face. Gold!

His heart hammered again as he realized it richness. He looked at Bill Clark, his eyes bulging, then he looked again at the vein. He turned to the cabin and saw that it was old, dilapidated and deserted. He knew intuitively that he had found what he had set out to find.

"There," he said in a hushed voice to Bill Clark, "there is the richest mine in the world. There is Heffler's Dream!"

SOMEHOW, Jim Silver had a hard minute trying to keep from shouting, from dancing, singing. He had made thousands of dollars many times when he had raced across the border with sacks of gold. But here was millions! Here was wealth greater by far than he had ever dreamed he would possess.

He rose to his feet and stood there, his great legs strangely trembling. Millions! Funny what images the thought of that created in his mind. Fame; power. A picture of himself richer than any man in the country. Why, he could have anything he wanted! Anything . . . .

"To think," said little Bill Clark. "To think of the thousands of men that looked for this place—and *we* found it!"

Silver nodded. He tramped toward the cabin and kept thinking of the things he could have with millions. A stable of horses as fleet as the wind. A house of granite and marble. Servants, diamonds —fame! And he would be the man who had re-discovered Heffler's Dream! Then suddenly Silver's vision clouded.

There would be *two* men who had discovered Heffler's Dream. Two men would be wealthy. Two men would have all those things he had thought of just a moment ago. Bill Clark would have everything that Jim Silver would have. And abruptly Jim Silver knew that Bill Clark would be just as famous, just as powerful, and just as colorful a person as Big Jim Silver!

"We have to record this," Bill was saying as they went into the cabin. "We have to get to Elktown quick and get this on record. Do you think we can make it into town from here, Jim? Can we do it, do you think?"

Big Silver looked around inside the ramshackle cabin. There was no food on the rotting shelves. It was only a shelter from the wind and the cold, with a fireplace where a man could keep warm.

"*I* can make it!" Big Silver said. "I can get to town and register the claim. Your horse is done, but I can do it afoot. You stay here and maybe trap enough rabbits to keep alive till I get back with supplies. That's the only way we can work it. It'll take me at least two days each way. Take the rawhide lacing out of your saddle girth and make rabbit traps. Even though you didn't get any, you'd be alive when I got here, if you keep warm."

Big Jim Silver watched Bill Clark nod. "Sure I'll be alive, Jim," Bill said, his eyes shining. "A man couldn't die now, could he, with all that gold in sight!"

"No," said Silver. "That would be a hell of a time to die!"

But he was beginning to have a hunch that Bill Clark would be dead when he came back. He was going to see to it that he was dead. Only one man would be rich, would have all the things he had visioned just a few moments ago.

Jim Silver hurriedly tore some boards from the floor and built a fire. He got a pick from behind the saddle of Bill's horse and picked some of the gold from that wide vein. The sight of it kept his heart hammering, warmed him, with the wild fire of it in his blood. The soft thud of the pick in that pure soft gold sent new strength into his arms, made him tireless. He gathered up huge handfuls of the pure yellow metal and put it in a canvas sack. Then he reached up above the vein and

clawed at the dirt till he covered the vein, hid it from sight. Back in the cabin, he handed the sack to Bill who hunkered beside the fire.

"I covered up the vein," he told Bill, "but there's some samples. I'll take just one hunk with me. You can keep the rest here. I'll be back in four days."

Bill Clark thrust the sack under the floor boards. He held out his hand.

"Good luck, Jim," he said. "I know there's only one man who could make it to town on an empty belly, and that one man is you. Whatever I get out of this I'll owe to you. I'd never be able to make it without you.

Jim Silver knew that, too. But why should he make Bill Clark rich when Bill could never get anything without Jim Silver's help? Why should he hear people say: "There go the two richest men in the country," when he could have them say: "There goes Jim Silver, the man who found Heffler's Dream, when a thousand men failed to find it?"

Jim tightened his belt. He pulled his big, wide-brimmed hat down on his yellow-haired head. He opened the cabin door and started down the slope

He was hungry and weak, but he knew he'd last because he had to last. Big Jim Silver was on his last big play, and his name would ring from one end of the land to another. Never again would he be broke or hungry. It was just as little Bill Clark had said: "A man can't die when that is before him."

A man couldn't die just when he could start to live . . . .

TWO days Bill Clark thought Jim would have to keep his legs working to get to town. But Jim figured he'd only have to last one day. For that would be long enough to reach a cabin he knew of in the hills, halfway between Heffler's Dream and Elktown.

Bill Clark didn't know about that cabin.

The drifts became heavier, soggier, as Jim descended the mountain slope The biting cold lessened, but the going was hard. Darkness made it difficult to know if his direction was right, but still he kept on. Tireless now, he was once more the Big Jim Silver of old, with a swing to his wide shoulders, with a tireless stride. And the picture of wealth and glory made him go on when other men would have stopped

Sharp against the gray of the night sky was the black nose of Malo Hombre Peak, and Jim Silver kept straight toward it. On and on he trudged till dawn came to lighten the sky, till before him emerged a black dot that gradually took the shape of a cabin. Step after step, while a swarthy man came to the cabin door and stood there with a rifle in his hand, watching Jim Silver come closer,

The man was a Mexican. He lowered the rifle as Jim Silver approached, but there was still suspicion in his eyes as he studied the approaching stranger.

Jim stopped, forcing himself to stand steady in his tracks as he put a smile on his lips.

"Do you not know me?" he asked in Spanish. "Is it possible that Rubio Salazar Gonzales, one time savior of Mexico, has forgotten the man who brought him arms and ammunition when his need was great?"

Rubio Gonzales nodded. "I remember you," he answered. "You are Silver. And I, Rubio Salazar Gonzales, will still be savior of Mexico."

"As soon as you have money?" asked Jim Silver. "All things that are great take money."

"As soon as I have money," he admitted.

"Then I can help you," said Silver. "For I have money. I have a sack of gold that will weigh fifty pounds. It is pure gold. At twenty dollars an ounce that much is sixteen thousand dollars. Would

you kill a man for that much gold, Rubio?"

Rubio's black eyes glistened, but the expression on his dark face did not change. "I have killed many men," he said. "One more would not matter, when the stakes are as high, and when the future of Mexico is in the balance."

"It is fine to talk to a patriot," Jim Silver said, "to one who thinks of his country and not of himself. For a man like that I have this sack of gold worth sixteen thousand dollars. And for a man who could kill one man to save a nation, I will tell where he can get it."

Rubio said nothing.

Silver went on. "In a cabin huddled down in a ravine between here and the mountain whose peak is always covered with snow, there is a man. He is a little man with hair the color of reddish sand, and eyes that are gray as the gray on the sides of a coyote. He has a sack of gold hidden in the floor beneath the boards. If this man were to die, there would be no one who would care enough to pursue his slayer. The one who killed him could journey on into Mexico, and have with him enough money to buy rifles and ammunition; enough perhaps to save Mexico from a tyrant."

"And what do you want for this?" asked Rubio.

Big Jim Silver smiled, shook his head. "Nothing but a slice of meat," he said. "A slice of meat, a few tortillas—and a guarantee of silence!"

RUBIO paced to a cupboard in the cabin, came to the door again with a hunk of dried meat and some tortillas in his hands. He handed them to Silver.

"You have made a bargain," he said. "I will leave now for the cabin on the mountain. I will take with me my companion, Garcia. If the gold is there we shall kill the man in the cabin. If it is not there we shall tell the man it is you who wanted him killed. Is that fair?"

"That is fair," said Silver. "The gold will be there. But also will many men be there in two days, for I shall bring them back with me. It would be wise for you to make haste."

Silver started away again, munching on the dried meat and devouring the tortillas. He smiled as he pictured the thing he had done. He would go into Elktown and record his claim in the name of himself and Bill Clark. He would get food for two. He would go back, and the men who rushed in his wake would be his witnesses that Bill Clark was dead when he arrived.

Rubio and Garcia would leave tracks in the snow to prove that some one other than Jim Silver had come to the cabin. It was worth much more than a sack of gold to know that no suspicion of Jim Silver would ever enter the minds of men, for he had rushed back with food for his starving partner, after recording the claim in both their names. And Rubio would rush to Mexico as fast as his horse could take him.

He would boast in Mexico that he had earned his gold honestly, or perhaps would say that he owned a mine from which he could secure much more gold than this that he had. He would promise riches for those who followed him. An army of peons would fight for many months, perhaps for years, with a promise backed by the sight of big nuggets of gold.

THE snow was behind him now. The sand of the desert dragged at his feet when he walked. The food and water strengthened him, but still he was tired. For two whole days and one entire night he had not rested nor eaten, except for this scrap of meat and the tortillas.

His red-rimmed eyes ached, his whole being screamed for sleep. But he knew the more exhausted he was when he arrived at Elktown the better. It must be known that he hurried, that he tried to

get back to Bill Clark who was starving . . . .

So Jim Silver staggered on. His eyes played tricks on him. They closed, and he walked in darkness, and did not know it. He stumbled and fell and discovered that he had walked in a circle and was facing back the way he had come. He tried to keep his brain awake by thinking of what he would do with millions of dollars. Millions! He repeated it aloud, then after awhile, suddenly discovered that his voice had stopped and it was his brain that was saying "Millions, millions, millions!" while his tongue was still, and his tired eyes were again closed.

Dazedly came the realization at last that he was at the edge of town. He realized that he was being stared at as though he were a ghost. A humming, buzzing sound came to his ears and he took it for voices, saying that here was Jim Silver. He barely knew when hands reached out to help him. Then, somehow, he was in the general store and a crowd watched while he pulled one great nugget of pure gold and dropped it with a thud on the counter.

"Supplies," his husky voice came dimly to his ears. "Supplies, and two of the fastest horses in the country. I have to get back quick. Bill Clark is starving. I've found Heffler's Dream!"

Then Silver dropped to the floor.

When he opened his eyes in a bed in the back of the store, he must have slept a long time, for he was rested. It was daylight and a crowd was in the store. It was filled with men who were dressed for travel, men who were ready to stampede as soon as they could get an inkling as to where Jim Silver had found Heffler's Dream. Men with the lust of gold shining in their eyes looked silently at Jim Silver as he appeared at the door.

"We was gonna wake you in another hour," somebody said.

SILVER squinted at the slant of the sun that poured through the store window. He looked at Wilke, the storekeeper. "Two horses are outside, Jim," Wilke said. "They're the best I could get. They'll beat anything in town. Your supplies are packed on one of 'em."

Silver went out and led the horses up the street. The crowd followed him. They asked no questions for they knew they would not be answered. They'd discover the location of Heffler's Dream when Jim Silver filed his location. And they'd all have an even start. . . .

Jim Silver went into the recorder's office and filed the location. He registered it in his own name and Bill Clark's, as partners. He pushed through the crowd that surged in to examine the records. He mounted his horse and started away, some of the men already running from the office, leaping on their horses and pounding after him.

He rode swiftly, but the packhorse held him back. Had it not been for the packhorse he would have easily out-distanced them all. But he didn't want to out-distance them. In fact he wouldn't care if some of them beat him there, for somebody had to find Bill Clark dead. It would be better to have somebody else do that.

The sun sank low and Jim Silver climbed into the hills. The air grew chill and the snow started to spot the darkness with patches of white. Jim Silver pushed on through it, for he had to appear as though he were in a hellish hurry.

Most of the stampeders were right behind him. Some of them straggled out on the flats below him. One was ahead, racing forward for a chance at a claim near the rich one belonging to Jim Silver and Bill Clark. The greed of gold was in them all.

The snow drifts deepened; their pace slowed, but it was a race with wealth at its end. A gamble for them all, except

Jim Silver who played a sure thing. Heffler's Dream belonged to him!

He spurred his horse forward as he sighted the cabin. He smiled as he saw that it was dark, that no smoke crawled upward from the chimney. Bill Clark was dead. . . .

FROM the minute Big Jim Silver had vanished from his sight, Bill Clark was lonely. He went back into the shack and hunkered down in front of the fire till the warmth of it crept into his bones. Then he went out and unlaced his saddle girth and went up into the pines to fashion some rabbit snares

He finished them and came back. There was a spring not far from the cabin. The running water trickled out of a rock, over the ice and into the frozen pool. Bill took a drink and went into the shack again. He guessed he'd have no rabbits till tomorrow

As he pictured Jim Silver bucking the drifts, making his way to Elktown, Bill smiled softly. What a hell of a swell fellow Jim Silver was! A swell fellow, even to pay any attention at all to an insignificant gent such as Bill Clark. And here Jim was, smashing his way through those drifts of snow into town, just to give Bill Clark half of this wealth they had found. No wonder men talked so much about him. No wonder his name was known from one end of the land to the other. . . .

Darkness came soon and the pangs of hunger gnawed at Bill. He tore up another section of the floor and built the fire up higher. He tore some shelving off the walls and piled it near the fire so it would be handy in the night. Then he lay down near the fire

Sometime after that, he heard a mountain lion scream up in the hills. Soon it screamed again, closer this time, then the night was so still that Bill felt uneasy.

He put another board on the fire and scrambled to his feet as a terrific snarl came from outside the cabin. Bill took his gun and opened the door.

A pair of yellow eyes glowed at him from the darkness. In the dim light a long, tawny shape was over near the spring Bill cursed suddenly and shot as he saw his horse was down. The lion bounded away in the darkness and Bill went out to the spring and saw that his horse was dead.

Bill stood there for a long time and looked at old Nero, the horse that had carried him for many miles, over all kinds of county, in all kinds of weather

Bill had been planning a lot on what he'd do for Nero when he got his fortune. Somehow, he'd identified the old, broken-down nag as with the same characteristics he himself had

Nobody had ever paid much attention to little Bill Clark. They didn't think he amounted to much. And that was the way with the old horse. The only one who thought he amounted to a damn was Bill

He moved out of sight in the shadows and waited with the gun in his hand, hoping that the lion would come back. But soon the cold drove him back to the cabin again.

He was awake at dawn, and hungrier than he had ever been in his life He staggered a little as he went out to look at his empty traps. Then he came back and looked at the dead horse.

He could eat some of the horseflesh, but he told himself he wouldn't do that. He argued with himself that that would sort of be like eating an old friend to eat Nero. He'd have to get a damn sight hungrier than he before trying it.

BILL got a rope from his saddle and set about making a trap for the lion He snared the top of a tree and gradually worked it down till he got a high tension on the rope. He snared it fast and made a separate hitch on it while he made a

trigger trip with a piece of wood. Then he let the separate rope go, and had a trap that would swing a lion high in the air if he stumbled against the trigger. He covered the trigger with snow and went back to the cabin, where he built up the fire again.

At the sound of hoofbeats he went to the door. It couldn't be Jim back that soon, and he wondered who could be coming here. He looked at two Mexicans who were eyeing him curiously

"It is very cold," said one, "and we are hungry. We see the smoke from your chimney and wonder is we can get warm. Yes?"

Bill nodded. "Sure," he said. "Come in and get warm. But I don't have any grub. I'm pretty hungry myself."

They dismounted and came inside. Bill turned as he went in the door. Then he stopped and stared stupidly at the muzzle of the gun that was held in the hand of the younger Mexican.

"What's the idea?" asked Bill

"The idea," said the Mexican in his halting but precise English, "is that you have a sack of gold that weighs about fifty pounds under the floor boards."

Bill Clark gulped, feelings sudden, inner chill as it struck him suddenly that the only one who knew of the gold under the floor was Jim Silver.

"At least," said the Mexican, "we were told you had it. We are to kill you for it. I will kill you if it is there. But if it is not there, I will not keep my bargain."

"Your bargain?" asked Bill Clark. "A—a bargain with Jim Silver?"

"Who else?" asked the Mexican. "If the gold is where he said it would be, I promised that you will die. It can do no harm for you to know he wished you to be killed."

AS HE stared at the cold, expressionless face of the Mexican, the fact that Jim Silver had hired his partner killed just to keep the gold for himself didn't seem real. If Jim had been frank enough to say he didn't want to split, that would have been okay with Bill

"It is here," said the older Mex. "Under the board where he said. And it is heavy. I—"

A thunderous report smote Bill Clark's ears. Dimly, he realized that he had been shot, as he felt something strike his chest. He reeled back, trying to keep from falling by placing one foot behind the other, but he wasn't fast enough. He lay still, his mind a daze, his eyes closed, with barely enough life left in him to realize what had happened.

He had been shot and would die, all because Jim Silver wanted all the gold. And he had hired it done, because he wouldn't want it suspected that he had had a hand in it. That was the man everybody thought was great!

Bill Clark heard a step near him. He tried to open his eyes but he was too weak. He heard the pound of horse's hoofs as the Mexicans left the yard.

Finally he knew it was night again and he wondered why he didn't die. He was too weak to live, but he kept on thinking what a low-down coyote Jim Silver was.

The scream of a lion up in the hills reached Bill Clark. He hoped his trap would catch the lion before it came to the open door smelling his blood.

The cabin was dark, but the dying coals of the fire threw a half-glow from the fireplace.

Gradually, Bill gathered the cloth of his shirt in a ball and pressed it on the wound in his chest. After a while the bleeding stopped. A snarl came, loud now, from outside the cabin and he managed to draw his gun and hold it weakly in his hand. Then a pair of yellow eyes glowed at the open door. The fire flared up and the lion tensed. With Bill Clark's fresh blood in its nostrils, it crouched, snarling.

Bill elevated the gun-muzzle as best he could, and pulled the trigger. Flame leaped out; the gun kicked up and back and Bill's weak fingers couldn't hold it. It fell from his hand and was beyond his fingers when he tried to reach for it again. But the lion was gone. Bill heard it screaming in rage out in the hills.

Bill Clark knew he would freeze soon. He kept the wadded cloth up on his wound and knew after a while that it had dried there. He let his hand fall down from his breast, for he could rest better that way. He knew he was numb. He was dying. He was going to freeze, and Jim Silver would be a millionaire.

When daylight came, it seemed strange that he was still alive. He couldn't move. He knew somehow that if he could eat and have some care he would live. But he could have neither care nor food.

Then he heard a sound of horses and the stomp of boots. He looked at the door and it was filled with men. Jim Silver was there. One of the men jumped forward and examined Bill while Silver stood staring, like a statue.

The fellow who had come in the cabin whipped a pan off his pack and handed it to Jim Silver.

"Get some water," he said. Then to another gent: "Get a fire going quick!"

There was a lot of bustle and a lot of talk. And then, above it all, there was a sudden scream outside the cabin—a shrill, sharp cry of mortal terror.

The men ran outside and left the cabin empty. When they came back and looked at Bill Clark

"Jim Silver is dead," they told him. "His foot got caught in a spring trap. It whipped him up and smashed his head against a tree."

They went on talking as they worked on Bill Clark. They told him what a hell of a swell fellow Jim Silver was. They mentioned that his first words as he came into town were for supplies for his partner, Bill Clark, who was starving out on the claim.

They told him he had hurried to get here with food. Bill, they said, should be mighty grateful to Jim Silver for he would be okay after a while. The bullet hadn't done much except make him lose a lot of blood. As long as he lived, spending his millions, Bill Clark should remember that if it hadn't been for Jim Silver he wouldn't have had his money.

Bill tried to open his mouth and tell them what kind of a gent Jim Silver was, but suddenly he knew it wouldn't do any good. They wouldn't believe him. Jim Silver had played his cards too well. Jim Silver was a hero, and Bill Clark was just a lucky stiff who profited accidently by Jim Silver's deeds.

"We'll put up a monument," somebody said, "to Jim Silver—the fellow who made us all rich!"

And Bill Clark nodded

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Guardian Queen of the Rockies

By Tom Roan

As if his rifle had jammed, he clubbed it against the oncoming, wounded grizzly. . . .

When the poacher band enters the country of the Wild Folk, Mamook, giant grizzly queen, knows her life is forfeit. . . . Yet that shambling half ton of gristle, claw and fang made wildling history against snapping hounds and tearing bullets—so that she and her clumsy, wondering cub might still keep lonely guard along the high rock ledges. . . .

MAMOOK arose on the ledge and shook herself violently. She shook every inch of her nine feet, from the black tip of her battle-scarred muzzle to the stubby root of her tail; she shook every ounce of her thousand pounds of suddenly alarmed and aroused grizzly bear fury.

She had been asleep only a moment ago, peacefully basking in the lowering sun-

light with Husky, her half-grown cub, held loosely but securely in her powerful arms—the pair making a limp brown mass sprawled, with complete abandon to their surroundings, on the shaggy spur of rock hanging a mile in blue space above the white rushing river.

Now, with Husky cowering back in the mouth of the old den there on the ledge, Mamook was standing on her hind feet, ready to fight. Her nose was elevated, sniffing at the cold, clear air of the Rockies; her curious, bead sharp, little bear eyes intently alive to danger.

Even to a sound-asleep grizzly, the noise which had come to her had been more than enough to bring her hurtling to her feet and instantly wide awake. Yet it had been faint and far away, a mere whisper in the early Fall afternoon. Distance had softened it, the sharp air had thinned it, but that tell-tale sound had found its way up the sheer walls of the valley below, like an echo of a far-away handclap, dying in the heavy timber on the dark slopes of the ridge west of the river.

It was the sound of a shot.

Mamook did not know it by actual name, but she knew enough to associate it instantly with past dangers, battles, trials and tribulations, just as all the Wild Life in these sky-sweeping Montana mountains knew it, feared it, and sought shelter when they heard it.

She silenced the whimpering cub with a growl. Not yet was she able to tell the direction that the shot had come from But she was intently looking down the valley, yet keeping a wary eye on the snow-capped ranges northward, as well as the timbered slopes of the ridge to the west

INSTINCTIVE cunning told her that it was too early for the usual Fall hunting season. All the Wild Life seemed to know the very day when that came around. But there were always poachers slipping about in the hills, their rifles ready, their prying eyes watching. One report of a rifle was usually enough to warn everything when they came around, looking not merely for meat and heads of big game to grace the walls of their snug dens; the poachers often came for skins and the teeth of elk, the latter to be sold for neat sums to men who wore them capped with gold and shining on their watch chains across their bellies.

A minute passed. Not a sound broke the stillness. Even Husky was quiet, knowing in a grizzly cub's way that something was about to happen, while Mamook was looking to northward, studying some strange, dark spot against the perpetual white cap of Old Baldy Dome. Suddenly her head jerked to the left

A fleeting shadow had caught the corner of her left eye She looked down the valley, at the rock studded little flat where the berry bushes grew. Something had moved down there, waving the heavy cloud of bushes on the little flat, and then the bushes were still again.

Mamook slumped lower on the ledge, a wicked glint in her eyes, her ears flattening. Then she started to sit up.

A SECOND sound had come to her, one that chilled her to the bone and stirred the old fighting fires in her enormous body. It was even fainter than the first, and it was not the sound of a shot this time. It was worse—the quick outburst of spasmodic sounds that arose like a wicked chuckling of laughter and died away in a whine.

Dogs—poachers' dogs! One could get out of the way of men and their rifles: Mamook had even stopped bullets a dozen times in the past, for a fighting grizzly could go through hell and come back alive, full of vim and damnation—and ready to fight all over again. But dogs were something else.

One could fight them off, it was true,

but they were a worry no bear liked. They often held one at bay until the men could get there. They were the tricksters, the come-along crew. No dog that ever walked could face a grizzly and expect anything but death; and most of the brutes knew that, kept their distance—and kept up their infernal howling and baying until their masters arrived with their rifles.

Keeping down, Mamook heard the baying of the dogs clearly now. They were sweeping closer, coming up the valley along the river.

Suddenly the brush on the flat was moving again. An antlered head appeared, and a beautiful elk stumbled forth from the brush. He broke into a faltering run. In a dozen yards a leg seemed to fold under him. He went down, twigs and pieces of shale flying As he stumbled to his feet another shot crashed

The second shot was close at hand. A tall, dark man had stepped from behind a tree. At the crash of his rifle the elk leaped high in the air, turned, and crashed down on its side, its feet and legs thrashing the ground furiously for a few wild strokes before they were suddenly still. Then the proud, antlered head lifting just once to stare at the approaching man before it fell back.

Mamook watched the man. He was an Indian with a big, black hat of the government-issue variety on his head. He walked cautiously to the elk, the rifle ready. The animal did not move, and the man walked to its head. He took something shiny from a hip pocket, and squatted there over the head. Mamook did not know it, but he was pulling two certain teeth from the dead elk's mouth.

The dogs broke through the brush a few moments later. The Indian had not yet had time to go to the mouth of the elk and draw those prized teeth. He whirled on the dogs, a pack of fifteen snarling and snapping brutes of a vicious breed. With yells and strokes of his rifle, the Indian drove them back from the dead animal, making them form a ragged circle. When they were quiet, the Indian went on with his work.

And now other riders were appearing. Fat squaws came out of the brush, mounted on shaggy ponies. They pulled rein, and slipped to the ground. After that, it was a job for the women to skin the elk, take certain choice pieces of the meat, and leave the rest for the dogs, the magpies and the buzzards.

MAMOOK watched a ragged camp go up not far above the place where the elk had been killed. She watched the smoke fires rise. It was only a small party, five men and six squaws, and three or four youngsters toddling about.

All the Wild Life could now figure themselves in for trouble. A flock of doves found that out when they came fluttering in just before sunset. A couple of shotguns roared, filling the air with flying feathers and falling birds. Then the camp fires burned brighter, and the mixed odors of cooking filled the air.

It was no place for Mamook and Husky. These poachers would kill everything in sight, and then move on to new hunting grounds. Nothing would halt them. Mamook knew that.

She moved back from the ledge. The dogs were still sniffing down there. At any time now they might run across a grizzly scent, and that would bring the accursed pack howling up the ledges and the men from the camp down there following them.

Husky whimpered. Mamook boxed his ears, and told him with her rumbling bear growls that it was time to leave the old home and that he was to follow just as she told him. They started, and Mamook knew enough to keep close to the rocks as they wound their way upward, turning several times to scale rough walls where a dog could not follow.

They climbed over the rim of the cliff below the old rattlesnake den in the rocks. The cub trotted forward, forgetting the danger behind, eager only to eat, and hoping to find some fat rattler who had not yet been driven into his den by the settling of night over the hills. Mamook again boxed his ears, and put him back at her right hip where a cub belonged.

In a berry thicket north of the rattlesnake den they found Old Skookum, usually a companion when trouble awoke in the hills. He was as busy as an old man with the seven-year itch. He was pulling away at the bushes, lapping in the berries as if it was his last chance on earth for food. He looked older every time Mamook came across him. One eye was gone, knocked out by a rifle bullet in the past. His hearing had about departed from him because of an old fall. His teeth were only snags, and the spots in his coat where the hair had fallen out seemed to have grown in size.

He greeted her with an old fraud's usual bombasticity, inspired without a doubt by grizzly female charm and a thought of the heavy stones she might overturn to allow him to feed on the gophers that would flee from beneath them. He put up his paws like a pious parson about to embrace a well-paying parishioner. She greeted him like some Irish washwoman coming home after a hard day and finding Patrick drunk in the kitchen. She whammed him a right paw-stroke to the side of the jaw that bounced him back on his rump as if it had been made from live rubber.

She told him, in a quarreling bear's way, just what kind of a fool she thought him to be. Here was danger right under his nose, a camp already up below the ledges, and considerable hell due to pop from it before they were much older. Yet here he was, slobbering about in a berry thicket and willing to make love to anything that came along, providing there was a free meal in the offing.

Skookum started to cry, but a sound halted him. It was down there in the twilight, a series of sharp *yip yips* coming from the direction of the ledges. Other cries joined it. A chorus of barking gradually made itself known. Those dogs back there had stumbled upon bear scent, and trouble for three grizzlies was already in the wind, doing its best to blow their way.

Settling darkness would not halt those brutes back there. Even the sheer wall Mamook had climbed would not keep them back

It would stop them, of course, but wise dogs would find a way around it. And their masters would follow, knowing that they were on the trail of bear—and that bearskins brought a great deal of money when properly handled.

OTHER sounds came a few moments later, and Mamook turned and looked at Old Skookum suspiciously. The second

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sounds were from the north, and that meant another camp of poachers somewhere not far away. It meant, also, that Old Skookum had been prowling about in that direction, that he had left his trail clear and easy to follow.

They started eastward. A round-faced moon swung up as if suddenly flung by a magic hand on the jagged spurs of mountain crags. The twilight vanished, and the stars came out, filling the heavens with twinkling light; and the darkness fled with the coming of those stars and the moon.

It was a beautiful night for prowling, but it was far from that when it came to fighting. Within an hour after Mamook and the cub had left their den there on the ledge, they were being pounced upon by a storming army of dogs that caught them at the head of a canyon-like gorge and swept upon them like a raging wind.

They were the pick of bear dogs. Half the brutes were more wolf than dog. Half of them did not bark at all; half of them closed in with only snarls and snaps, their shaggy tails between their legs, their beadbright eyes wicked pin-points filled with fury in the moonlight and the starshine

Old Skookum crowded close to Mamook, pressing against her left side. Not yet had the old devil's fighting grizzly spirit asserted itself. The cub crowded against her right side, whimpering. It was his first battle, his first time to face a snarling pack of poachers' dogs, and stand beside the mighty Mamook in a battle to death.

Those with less wisdom than courage rushed her. Mamook killed the first brute in mid-air with a lightning stroke that would have done credit to any cat. She caught the lunging dog fairly and squarely with a side-swipe, a slap that caught him on the side of the head with the crack of a breaking limb in a gale. The dog landed down among the rocks, and didn't move again.

Husky was into it a minute later. He was a little clumsy at first. A dog piled on him, slipping through the lightning strokes of the powerful mother. The dog bowled the cub backward. Their mouths met, slammed together, and closed. It was instant suicide for the dog. Then the furious grizzly spirit boiled in Husky like a red-hot coal tossed in water. He tore into the dog, felt the dog lift, and saw him swing away in the air as if every bone in his body had been shattered.

OUT of the tail of her eye Mamook saw it. Without even shifting her feet, her right paw had shot down. It had caught the dog one furious blow—a blow that would have killed any horse—and had flung him away as neatly as an elephant could have slapped a jaybird off a rock with one sweeping stroke of his trunk

Old Skookum was into it, too, by this time. Gone was his constant grumbling for food and his bombastic flair for trying to make love to all the sleek grizzly females that came his way. He was a roaring old devil, nine hundred pounds of blue hell and lightning on the knock about. He even stepped in front of the mighty Mamook, and caught a dog headed for her. There was lightning death in those old paws yet, and he sent the dog flying fully twenty feet away.

It could have gone on all night. All the dogs in Montana could have come to join it, and those three fighting grizzlies there with their rumps against the rocks would have met them as they came. But the Indians entered it.

It was a bright night, an ideal one for hunting; and Mamook heard them coming through all the snarling and the fighting. She heard the rattle and crash of hoofs. She heard a voice singing out in the night, encouraging the dogs to remain with their find until the riders could come up with their rifles and finish the thing the brutes had started.

Mamook started the retreat with a growl to old Skookum and Husky. The cub kept close to her. Old Skookum brought up the rear for a little while, and then floundered on ahead, with dogs springing upon his back to sink home their fangs before flinging themselves nimbly away.

Once they pulled down the cub, and Mamook exploded all the fury in her fighting soul. She tore the dogs from the cub, slapping them into broken heaps of bloody meat, and then charged straight out into the pack as the other dogs closed around her.

Old Skookum and Husky came up when the dogs were swarming over her like angry bees. They drove the dogs back, killing them and slashing them down with their powerful strokes until the dead lay in a circle, while the wiser brutes kept back out of range.

Yelling Indians and the closer pounding of hoofs sent them on. They blundered and fought along the foot of the rocks. Twice more they were surrounded, and twice more Mamook fought her way through, the incessant bear-strokes drove home with their tireless fury.

A crevice in the rocks finally offered a way out. As a human mother would spank her youngster to start him quickly toward something, Mamook spanked Husky, heading him into the crevice. She let out a fierce snarl at Old Skookum, and fearing her more than the dogs, the old bear started after the cub. Mamook battered down the swarm of dogs around her, standing there jammed in the crevice. . . . And then she saw the riders sweeping closer.

SHE turned, beating dogs from her, and started up the crevice just as a rifle crashed not far away and a bullet singed her throat. At any other time she might have charged the rifleman on the spot, but Husky was there ahead of her, going up and up like a scampering brat while the dark shape of the enraged Old Skookum followed, grumbling back defiance over his bloody shoulder.

Mamook slapped a swarm of dogs from her as she turned. She cleared the mess behind her with a leap, and stopped a moment later to finish off two of the brutes that dared to follow her, when the rifle crashed again. A bullet raked her across the shoulder, and then other riders were coming up, their rifles suddenly gashing out their streaks of orange fire.

Bullets rained the rocks around them as shrill cries came from the Indians. Many of them had leaped from their horses to drop to one knee to take aim. Mamook heard a bullet slap something above her. She heard a snarl, and saw Old Skookum rise to his hind-feet. For a moment the old-man bear tottered there, a figure poised between life and a death-charge.

He decided on the latter, and was suddenly whirling, darting back down the way he had come. He leaped over Mamook, snarled back at her warning roar, and kept right on going.

HE WAS a hero without knowing it, a hero without trying. Stricken with a bullet between the ribs that would have brought death eventually to any grizzly, Old Skookum had only one thing in mind. That was to get down where he could get his paws on the killers to repay them for what they had done to him.

Dogs scattered in front of him. An Indian discharged his rifle almost in that snarling bear face. Old Skookum felt the bullet rip through the side of his jaw, felt the hot taste of blood rush into his mouth. It did not stop him. He kept right on in his wild charge, going home to death, with no thought of the glory that the Indian, himself, would have attached to such a thing.

The man tried to run. As if his rifle

had jammed, he clubbed it, then thought better of battling that immortal grizzly. He whirled amid the fierce, eagle-like crying of his fellows and the baying and snarling of the dogs swarming after the old bear

The man snatched at his horse's mane. The horse snorted, pitched, and tore away from him He tried to duck to one side. Nine hundred pounds of raging fury caught him in its arms, snatched him to it in a grip that crushed his bones like chalk, and a powerful bear muzzle reached under the man's chin. For a split second, two hot little eyes gleamed in a furry face smeared with blood, and Old Skookum, the ancient, had hurled the man's broken body down upon the dogs closing around him.

He tore another man off his horse a moment later who came charging in, Indian fashion, to slip home the death-shot. Old Skookum caught him on the thigh with a glancing blow. His claws, dulled and twisted though they were, opened the thigh to the bone and spilling the suddenly unconscious Indian sprawling on the ground.

A .403 rifle bullet knocked him down a few moments later. The dogs swarmed over him. He shook himself, and tore his way up, with wild strokes killing dogs to the right and left. Another bullet caught him squarely, and again he was down, an old, old man selling out his life in roaring grizzly fashion.

Forty devils must have been in his blood. Old Skookum came up, up through flying dogs and the smell of blood and burned powder; up through all that snarling and snapping of the brutes piled over him. He killed three more of them, and then tore through the raging pack toward another man, darting his horse in close with his rifle ready.

With one long bear stroke, he missed the man as he stumbled, but that big paw caught the horse by the leg. There was a wail of terror from the Indian, a bawl from the horse, and the horse was down, his rider flying on to land in a rolling and bouncing bundle on the ground. And again the indomitable Old Skookum was down.

For a moment the spirit went out of him. He lay there dazed and battered, his body riddled with bullets. Teeth tore into him. Indians shouted, thinking him dead and trying to drive back the dogs before they completely spoiled what promised in the semi-darkness to be a perfectly good bear coat. A pair of jaws reached for Old Skookum's throat. He jammed down his muzzle, and once more the fighting spirit was surging over him.

When he came up, and he looked as strong as he had at the beginning. His sudden show of life threw the dogs back, some of them yipping with quick fear of this thing rising again to battle.

For a moment he stood clear of the dogs, and the rifles of the Indians—now that the dogs were in the clear—started blazing again. Old Skookum struck at one of them, and raked the ribs of a horse darting past him Then a roar like a crash of lightning filled his head.

The stars seemed to blink in the sky. The earth rose upward A bloody fighting shape went down in total darkness, unaware now of the swarming dogs, unaware of the Indians yelling around him Skookum, the mighty, was dead. . . .

MAMOOK had kept on, quarreling with the cub, slapping him when he even showed a hint of wanting to stop. They came out on the top of the cliff. For a few moments Mamook stood there looking back, watching that gallant old fraud of a bear fighting his last battle. Only the cub kept her out of it, and now in the high, clean air they started on at a shuffling trot.

It looked as if they were out of it, but they were not. Dogs were after them

again in a little while, and Mamook urged the cub into a faster pace. She knew where she was going; it was only a matter of getting there. Once there, no dog could follow her and no man would try it, for it was a den in a sheer cliff where one had to climb down the smooth face of the rocks for two hundred feet before they came to a narrow lip of rock. She had used it before in times of trouble with hunters, and she would use it now—if they could make it in time to the edge of the cliff.

Yelps lifted into a harsh bugle-wailing behind them when they were half-way across a great plateau. A dark mass took shape in the moonlight, stringing out and thinning away into a running streak. Not yet were there any men in sight, and Mamook spanked the cub to make him break into a tireless run.

The dogs surrounded them a short time later. This time they did not close in so readily. It was as if the less-wise had been killed off back there in the fighting with the Indians. The dogs simply made a big circle around them, and held their distance as they tried to bring the grizzlies to a halt by those in the lead darting in in front with snarls and snaps

Mamook was tired of it. Grudges and fighting fevers did not last long with her. As a usual thing, she kept her spirits fairly well controlled, but nothing could last forever. She kept going, and the dogs kept trying to stop her, and then, at last, she looked back over her shoulder, and saw horsemen coming

It would mean another fight. Mamook knew that as well as a man would have known it. She changed the course slightly, and headed for a great pile of rocks near the other side of the plateau. If she could not make it to that hole in the cliff, she would at least find some shelter, for it would mean only death out here in the open

The men came on, gaining rapidly. Mamook changed the pace into a wild run by leaping on and taking her place beside the cub. The dogs must have thought that they saw their chance. They closed in with a spasmodic rush. Mamook killed one that seized her; she sent another sprawling that came within reach, and then, out of the tail of her eye, she saw Husky smack a lunging brute down with a neat stroke of a forepaw.

They reached the rocks with the men barely ninety yards behind them. Mamook hustled the cub through a narrow opening between two overhanging pillars of granite. She banged the dogs out of her reach, and followed. When one of the brutes tried to come after her, she sent him howling and wailing in a backward spill among his mates.

YOUNG Chief Running Horse looked the situation over when he came up and slipped from his pony's back. He was in a white rage. Back there at the place of the other fight his brother had been killed. To make matters worse, many dogs lay dead, dogs that had been schooled for months and taught every hunting trick an Indian knew. But capping the climax completely, it had been found that the bear they had killed had a hide on him that was too old and worn to make it worth removing from the body

Chief Running Horse ordered the rocks surrounded. The bears were in there; there was no question about it. They would not get away. Everybody would sit here until morning, all day tomorrow, and even all night tomorrow night to get that she-bear and that half-grown cub. The cub's hide would bring a price.

But the longer they waited and watched, and the more the dogs circled, the more monotonous it became. The bear had a den in those rocks somewhere. One Indian, Eagle Feather, was certain of that. When dawn came he was ready to prove it.

He had tried all night to get the dogs to

go in, and the dogs had refused point-blank. The dogs had sense; others pointed that out. But Eagle Feather declared it a lie, and finally he was ready to show that the dogs were only cowards. When daylight came he was ready to prove it—even with Chief Running Horse ordering him to stay out of there.

Eagle Feather clenched a big knife between his teeth, looked at his six-shooters and with a .403 rifle cocked and ready, he crept into the rocks.

The others waited expectantly. , The minutes dragged, and finally two of the dogs were coaxed into following Eagle Feather. Then at last came two sharp yip-yips, and the rocks were silent. No roar of a gun came from them, no cry of fear or for help.

It was enough to make any Indian nervous. Eagle Feather was a fool. Chief Running Horse should not have let him go. Everybody said that, but Indians did not obey their chiefs these days. There was nothing Chief Running Horse could do about it.

They moved back from the rocks to give the bear a chance to come out. They called the dogs back, and they tried to call back the two that they had urged into the rocks after Eagle Feather. The dogs did not come, and mid-morning came, then noon, then the afternoon. When three buzzards slowly circled over the rocks, everybody knew that death lay before them.

IN DESPERATION, Chief Running Horse led his men back. Not for the life of him could he allow this to happen. He grouped his men around the rocks once more, and a yell came from the other side. The body of Eagle Feather had been sighted, its bloody head protruding from a crack up there.

Then somebody saw a huge bear face grinning down at him. Before he could jerk his rifle to his shoulder, the blood-streaked face had disappeared, leaving only the head of Eagle Feather showing

They grew a little crazy then. One man climbed up on the outside of the rocks and was finally close enough to throw the loop of a rope around the dead Indian's head. With pulls and jerks, the body was finally dislodged and slid down to the waiting crowd. A quick examination showed that the man's head had been crushed with a blow from behind—crushed as if he had been struck with a great hammer.

"He was slipping up on the bear," explained Chief Running Horse, "and the bear slipped up on him. This looks as if ghosts were at work."

It looked worse than that a second later. A great shape moved into being from beneath two tall slabs of rock, her cub at her heels. The Indians were caught red-handed.

Everybody yelled at the same time. Everybody started to go in the same direction at the same time. Furred and clawed thunder and lightning knocked four of them off their feet. A man had his arm almost torn off. The half-grown cub smashed another man's ribs, and as quickly as they had come the bears were gone again, darting back under the slabs of rock with dogs running in an opposite direction instead of trying to follow them.

MAMOOK had seen her chance, and she had been sensible about it. She had killed Eagle Feather without a sound when he had come sliding up behind a rock just beneath her, simply by reaching down with one quick stroke. There had been a sound like an egg cracking, and the Indian had dropped, turned a backward summersault, and had gone sliding down in the rocks

The dogs had been just as foolish, poking their nose in this crack and that, and Husky had shown his spirit by killing them both with strokes that had come so

rapidly the dogs had scarcely had time to cry out.

Now the Indians were rattled. Most of them had dropped their rifles, and one side of the rocks had been cleared. Mamook studied it, looked on across the plateau to the rim of the cliff she was seeking, and decided to make the final run for it.

They came out in a hurry. It was a straight dash, and there was no time lost. With the cub at her side, Mamook led the way. A dog loomed in front of her, frozen with fright by her sudden charge. She bowled him out of the way with a slap, and scurried on with shots and roars from rifles lifting behind her.

It was the dogs which probably saved Mamook and Husky. The brutes jumped back into the fight, and for a few moments they kept the Indians from firing. They could not afford to kill their dogs, and the bulk of the men darted for their horses, slinging themselves upon them and taking out after the bears in hot pursuit.

Mamook saw it all over her shoulder. She saw one horseman who was faster than the others. The man shot ahead of the rest. He was riding straight for the rim of the cliff, a young chief who had led a hunting party into disaster and was now trying to redeem himself in the eyes of his people, by a panic-stricken show of bravery.

Mamook saw the man leap from his horse. She and Husky were all but covered with dogs now, but they were still running. She saw the Indian give his horse a slap, saw the horse dart on out of danger. Now the man was dropping to one knee, rifle jerking to his shoulder. A puff of smoke spat, and Mamook felt the bullet rake against the side of her head.

She heard a dog cry out an instant later. The second shot from the Indian had wounded it, and then bears and dogs were atop the Indian. His rifle was flung out of his hand. For a moment hell blazed above him. A lightning paw came down, catching him fairly on the side of his head; then bears and dogs were going on, a snarling, fighting cloud that came to a halt on the rim of the cliff.

The cub was literally booted forward, as a fighting mother raked a dog from his back. Husky let out a whimper, and started down, rump-first. Mamook filled the air with flying dogs all around her. With something akin to a sigh, she slipped over the edge of the rocks, going down and down to safety below.

When they reached the old den it was cool and dark. The same old pool of ice water was there in the center of it. Mamook lapped up a little of it. She licked the cub's wounds, and took a few laps at her own. In a few days all would be well again.

She yawned sleepily, and moved on to her favorite old corner back there in the darkness. . . .

WHEN KILLERS

By W. H. B. Kent

A gun went off over Wilder's head, and he swore, "Damn, you, Pete!"

Powerful novelette of forbidden ranges

What chance had Jim Wilder, horse-rancher, to settle in the lush grazing grounds of the Chollas? For all he had were three gaunted, unpaid punchers, the dubious backing of some weak-spined, whining nesters, and his own gun. . . . Against the greediest, toughest outfit in those mountains, and a girl, whom no frontier rancher like Jim ever would—or could—fight!

RIDE AT SUNSET

CHAPTER ONE

"Take Your Dead With You!"

THE two shots that echoed across the foothills of the Cholla Range might have been a long awaited signal. A signal that awoke the echoes of the Chollas to a long succession of shots, and maddened fighting men.

Three hundred horses were not a great addition to the stuff that ranged along the southern foothills of the Chollas. It was not that relatively small number of stock which caused those first warning echoes of gunfire. It was because any new intruders, no matter how few, had arrived. That—and the coming of a leader.

The long suppressed little outfits—settlers, men homesteading the water holes and running a few hundred head of cows—living on sufference, ordered here and there and occasionally put calmly

out of business altogether, had been waiting despairingly for the coming of a leader. And like wildfire in dry grass the echoes of those two shots flowed across the foothills of the Chollas.

IT WAS early in August when Jim Wilder, with his three hundred head of horses and three ragged young cowpunchers rode through the pass in the Chollas. In his early thirties, lean, dark, hawk-faced Jim Wilder had ridden for a year to that meeting with the foreman of the Crazy K. It was as though he had a definite appointment with the man in the pass, and ridden a thousand miles to keep it.

It was pleasant there in the pass, under the great peak of the Chollas. Dark pines stood around the man and his horses, and the smell of warm pine needles came up to him. Away up to the left, high above the Ninion growth, the black, fire-tortured peak of the ancient volcano shot upward into the blue sky of southern Arizona.

Through a gap in the trees Jim Wilder looked away down across the tumbling foothills over the miles of the gaunt ribs of the Cholla Range, and out across the Valley of the Sacatone. There the gray desert heaved and shimmered under a hot sun.

Water gushed from a dozen springs in the pass; cool, clear water that rippled and danced in a sweet song over green stones. Jim Wilder turned a slow smile on the ragged cowpuncher beside him. "Well, what do you think, Pete? Is it worth fighting for?" he asked.

Young Pete's blue eyes were open wide in astonishment. He was thinking of the Texas Panhandle, the dreary wastes of the Llano Estacado, the Pecos, the Animus, the Sulphur Springs, the San Simon, the San Pedro—hot, dry and dreary. But here he heard running water slipping joyously over the stones, he could look down the long aisles of the forest and smell the sweetness of the pines. Very softly young Pete said, "Gosh!" and grinned at his boss.

Jim Wilder smiled his slow smile again. "All right" he said. "Let them drift. You go back and help the boys shove 'em through the pass."

As Pete turned his horse and rode away, Wilder called after him, "Fix up the fence after you are through." Pete nodded and kicked up his horse.

The lead horses, drinking thirstily at the brook, had stopped all together, pricking their ears forward and looking across the stream.

Jim Wilder had been thinking about that pole fence in the pass. There would, of course, be a drift fence there. He wondered who had built it, who kept it up. Then he turned an alert gaze to see what the horses were watching.

There was movement far away among the trees, gleaming shadows in and out among the pines. Three men riding abreast, came forward on dainty-footed, fast-stepping cow ponies.

Jim Wilder thought, "So, it's beginning already," and his lean dark face grew hard and cold.

ONE of the three men drew away from the others, riding down to where the horses were grouped along the water. He rode among them, insolently looking for brands. He lashed at one of the horses with the loop of a rope.

Jim Wilder's jaws tightened as he watched the other two riding up. Without conscious thought he noticed the Crazy K on the shoulders of the horses.

The horses were streaming down through the pass now, hundreds of them, coming gladly down to the stream to drink, then going avidly after the clumps of gray-blue bunch grass. The man who had been looking over the brand quit and loped up to join the other two.

The three men came abreast of Jim Wilder. They were lean, hard-faced, and with cold, cruel eyes. Jim Wilder knew the type too well. He thought, "Killers."

The man in the middle spoke, snarled a question insolently, "Hey you, whose horses is them?"

Wilder's face was as hard and cold as those of the killers as he answered: "Mine."

The man asked, "Didn't notice no fence up there in the pass, did you feller?"

Wilder said, evenly, "I saw the fence."

The man snarled, "Then, git them horses back of that fence. And don't waste no time doing it. We ain't allowing no new stock on this range, feller." He added sourly, "Git going, or you're damn sure running into a streak of bad luck."

Wilder's muscles tensed. He was paying attention only to the man's eyes, holding the hot malignant glare of a man about to kill. Then Wilder said softly, contemptuously: "Go to hell."

The man reached for his gun.

Wilder's gun seemed to have leaped of its own accord into his hand. He shot from his hip

The two shots were so close together they sounded like one very long shot. Even the echoes could not separate them. The long drawn-out echoes rumbled along the cliffs of the great peak of the Chollas and were thrown down again.

Down by the creek the horses jumped and snorted, running together in close bands, then stopping, wide eyed, to look back over their shoulders.

There was the sound of a running horse, the hoofbeats muted in the soft pine needles. Ragged young Pete was there on a plunging horse, a rifle in his hand, asking, "What the hell?".

And Jim Wilder sat there, his smoking gun in his hand, slit-eyed and hard-faced, watching the two men beside the man he had shot.

That man stayed in the saddle a long time. A look of dull surprise came over his face, as if realizing that something incredible had happened to him. His lax fingers opened, the six-shooter dropped to the ground. Then the look of dull surprise gave way to vacancy. Suddenly he collapsed, pitching head down over the shoulders of his horse. The horse snorted, side-stepped and backed away.

The other two men had their hands on their gun-butts when Pete broke the silence.

He spoke softly, almost genially, "Go on, pull 'em."

Wilder's voice cracked like a whip around their heads. "Drop it!" he snarled.

The men's hands left their guns and came up above their shoulders. Wilder spoke to Pete. "Take their guns."

Pete slid slowly off his horse, his cocked rifle over his arm. He walked over to the men, pulled the six-shooters from the holsters, then the rifles from the scabbards, throwing them off to one side

One of them asked, "That all?"

Wilder told him, "Yeah. That's all."

The men kept their hard eyes on Wilder and Pete as they began, slowly, to turn their horses

Wilder's voice lashed out at them again. "Here! Take your dead with you."

One of the men looked down contemptuously at the dead man. He said, "He ain't *my* dead!"

Wilder spoke gently, "You heard me."

The man looked at Wilder then he shrugged slightly, got off his horse, picked up the dead man and threw him across the empty saddle. The horse caught the smell of fresh blood, snorted and backed away. The man beat the horse over the head and eyes with the ends of the reins. He mounted his own horse and the two of them, without a look or word rode away down the long aisles of the forest, leading the horse with the dead man.

Pete asked, "How come?"

Wilder told him, "He ordered us back

through the pass. Then he pulled a gun on me."

Pete spoke affectionately. "You'd think he'd a had more sense than to pull a gun on Jim Wilder."

Jim Wilder said, "Shut up."

They were still watching the place among the trees where the men had disappeared. There was a flicker of movement there. Pete muttered, surprised, "They're coming back!" He cocked his rifle.

THE dull sound of trampling horses and then low voices came to them. Four men rode into view. Pete slid off his horse, standing behind it, his cocked rifle across the saddle. He complained to Wilder, "Better watch yourself."

The four men, grouped close together had pulled up their horses, talking in low tones among themselves. They seemed to make a point of keeping their hands away from their guns. Then they spurred up, and the man on the right grinned to ragged young Pete. "You can put it up, young feller," he said. "We ain't no war party."

Pete answered, "Jest keep yore paws off yore guns, and there won't be no war."

Wilder said, "Shut up, Pete."

One of the men looked at Wilder, "Did you kill Gore's foreman?"

Pete answered. "Sure he did. Why wouldn't he? He pulled a gun on him."

The man dug his feet down in his stirrup, looked at Wilder and Pete and then twisted around in his saddle to look at the horse herd spreading out through the trees. He looked at Wilder again, grinning a wry grin, "Well, you sure done something," he said. Then he added, "And I'm damn glad of it!"

Wilder nodded and said, "Put up your gun, Pete."

The man said, "Name of Gorden. Let's talk."

Jim Wilder and the four men slid off their horses, dropping the reins on the ground. Gorden sat cross-legged on the warm pine needles and twisted up a cigarette.

Pete shoved his rifle back in the scabbard and came away from his horse. He stood behind Wilder, thumbs hooked in his gun belt, watchful. He thought, "Looks all right. But if it ain't, then that's all right, too!"

Gorden picked up a stick and made marks on the ground as he talked. "It's like this," he said. "We"—he nodded his head backward toward the three men "—we're little people. Settlers, homesteaders. We've all got nice places if we had a chance to develop. We farm a little, raise some alfalfa, some truck garden stuff to sell at the mines; things like that. Then we all run a few head of cows. Probably I've got the most, around three hundred head."

Gorden's face hardened as he went on. "Last year I had a chance to buy a hundred head of yearlings cheap. I drove 'em in and then that damn Gore served notice on me I'd have to get rid of them. And he fixed it so I had to sell to him. He paid less than I paid for 'em—and after trailing 'em in here." Gorden swore softly.

Wilder asked, "Gore?"

Gorden answered, "Yes, Gore. Owns the Lazy K outfit. One of the two big outfits that control this country. He's mean. And he has a mean crew. Killers." Gorden jerked his head. "That fellow you shot was Gore's foreman."

A gleam of admiration shown in Gorden's eyes as he added, "And he's supposed—" then he corrected himself—"He *was* supposed to be the fastest man with a gun in the territory."

Gorden went on, exasperation in his voice. "They just naturally tell us when to get up and when to go to bed. And I'm damn sick of it!"

Wilder asked, "You said 'two big outfits'. What about the other one?"

They all turned their heads to see the last of the horse herd come pouring down from the pass. The horses spread out along the creek to drink. Two ragged young cowpunchers rode up, looked inquiringly at Pete, slid off their horses and came to stand beside him, their thumbs hooked in their gun-belts.

GORDEN wiped out the marks he had made in the dirt and began to draw a new figure. He seemed curiously reluctant to start talking about the other outfit. After a little he said, "Thats the SM." A little later he added, "It's owned by a girl named Ann Fuller. She's old Jim Fuller's girl. He's dead now. The outfit is run by their old foreman, called Idaho. Idaho worked for the Fullers all his life, I reckon. Came in here with old Jim in the early days, brought in the first stock." He jerked his head to the westward. "That old adobe they use for a bunkhouse was the first building. You can see the bullet marks where they stood off the Apaches in the old days. He paused, then said, "Old Idaho is all right—but you better not try to run anything over on him."

Gorden made some more marks in the dirt. "Gore figures on marrying Ann Fuller. Then he'll own the whole country."

One of the men with Gorden spat with disgust.

Gorden looked up at Wilder, meeting his eyes squarely. "Now I'm telling you where you get off. You can gather your horses and shove 'em back through the pass. If you do that, right now, you may be able to get away."

Wilder's slow smile came to his hawk face. He shook his head, speaking mildly. "But I sort of like this place. I'm staying."

Young Pete laughed with delight and whacked the young fellow beside him, knocking a cloud of dust from the ragged shirt.

Gorden went on, "It will take them two-three hours to get to the Crazy K. Then Gore and his killers will be on your trail. You ain't got a chance. And I know that Gore will make this an excuse to clean us all up."

Wilder asked, "And this girl at SM?"

Gorden said nothing about the girl in his answer. "Old Idaho is all right, and there are good lads riding for him, but in a case like this, they just naturally have to take Gore's side."

One of the men with Gorden got to his feet and stood there a minute. One of the others asked, "What's eating you now?"

The man hesitated a minute, then blurted out angrily, "I'm leaving now. I got a wife and kid, and I ain't going into no range war."

Gorden spoke quietly, "And I've got a wife and two kids. That's why I'm going to fight."

The man said, "I don't see it that way." He stomped over to his horse, mounted and rode away down through the trees.

The rest looked at each other, nodding their heads as though at something they had known before.

One of the men said, "That time my woman took sick, Ann Fuller came over and took care of her for two weeks." After a minute he added, gloomily, "But I ain't being shoved off my homestead, nohow."

Gorden got briskly to his feet, holding out his hand to Wilder. He said, "Alone, you ain't got a chance, but if we help each other we may win out. What about it?"

Wilder shook hands with Gorden. "I'm with you," he said quietly.

Gorden led his horse back to the group. As he mounted he spoke again. "A mile down the creek there's a wide trail running east and west. West leads to the SM; east to the Crazy K. My place is down

the creek about five miles from here. I got a good solid log home. You better bring your horses right along down the creek. Them Gore killers ought to make it back here by sunset."

CHAPTER TWO

Worth Fighting For!

JIM WILDER stood somber-eyed, watching the men ride away down through the long shadows of the trees. When they were out of sight he turned and spoke to the three ragged young cowpunchers, "I'm sorry to let you in for this."

They chuckled. "Now don't let that bother you none Jim. We like this place fine!"

Wilder looked around the pleasant land, nodding his head, "Yes," he agreed, "Looks as if it was worth fighting for!" Then he caught up his horse, mounted and rode back

He looked gravely into the eager faces of the young cowpunchers. Their very raggedness did queer things to his throat They had not, he remembered, had any pay for six months.

He told Pete, "Drift 'em along down the creek. No hurry. I'll be back long before sunset."

As he turned and rode off Pete hollered, "Hey, where you going?"

Wilder put his hand back on the rump of his horse, stretched around in the saddle. "I'm going to have a talk with that Idaho man."

Pete grinned, moving his hand airily, "Give her my love."

Wilder stopped, looking surprised, asking "Who's her?"

Pete said, "The gal that owns the SM."

Wilder answered, thoughtfully, "That's right, they did say that. A girl named Ann Fuller." And when Pete snickered knowingly, Wilder said, "Shut up," and rode away.

He rode down a long slope, in and out among the trunks of the pines. He turned into a trail that started up a long slope, came out on a open shoulder of the mountains and looked down the ridges to the Valley of the Sacatone and then off to where the desert seemed to smoulder in the pulsing heat.

Beyond the desert, in the infinite distance, a long blue line ran along where the sky and earth met.

"Mountains" he thought, and the age-long question of the stockman came to him. "Wonder if there is water and grass there?"

Away down to the left, dwarfed by the miles, he saw a toy house beyond a long open field. "That's Gorden's," he said, and rode on. "Yes, it's a good land," he repeated to himself. "It's sure worth fighting for!"

He was dropping down out of the higher hills, the yellow pines changed to pinons and the hot acrid smell of junipers stung his nostrils. It made him think of powdersmoke, and he pulled the Winchester partly out of the scabbard and shoved it back again.

He came out of the trees, crossed a ditch of running water. Beyond a fence the field of alfalfa seemed intolerably green.

Many ranch buildings, corrals and more corrals sprawled through and out of a grove of cottonwood. A windmill flickered in the hot sunshine.

When he came to a long adobe bunkhouse with the pock-marks of bullets in the walls, he slid off his horse and went in. The cool, shady rooms were empty.

His spurs rattled as he led his horse along toward the main house. From off to the right in the cookshack, pans rattled and a Chinese voice complained bitterly. There were flowers, a long row of blooming hollyhocks. Wilder thought, a little contemptuously, "And with a woman, they probably have milk and butter!"

A TALL, slender girl, dressed in blue jeans, jumper and spurred boots, walked out of the shade of the cottonwoods, half closing her eyes against the white sunlight.

She started to speak as if she knew him, then she sobered, her eyes widened uncertainly at Wilder.

Wilder forgot his business and stared at the girl. He stared at the tall slim body, the heavy mass of dark brown hair and level brows and violet eyes, a high thin nose and wide, generous mouth. Suddenly both the man and the girl flushed. The girl laughed.

Wilder's sudden and profound interest in the girl annoyed him. He was confused and spoke sharply, "Any of your menfolks around?"

The girl looked at him coolly, a little arrogantly. "What is it?" she asked. "Looking for a job? I'm afraid—"

Wilder broke, "No. I'm not looking for a job."

A tall, gaunt man with a long white mustache over a clean-shaven chin walked out of the house and stood looking at Wilder. He shoved one hand down inside his gun belt and pulled at the mustache with the other. There seemed to be a flicker of amusement in his cold gray eyes as he looked from Wilder to the girl and back again. He asked, "Yes?"

Wilder was glad to turn away from the girl. He wished she would go away so he could talk a man's business with another man. Range wars were not women's business, though they were the ones who suffered most.

A horse was coming at a trot. A man rode out of the cottonwood grove, sharply pulling up a splendid horse in front of the girl. He called out, "Hi, Ann."

The girl said, coolly enough, "Hello, Gore."

Wilder looked at the man, thinking, "So that's Gore?" He hardened himself awaiting an outbreak, letting his hand drift idly in the direction of his gun-butt.

Gore was a heavily-built, middle-aged man, and unconsciously Wilder was conscious of feeling an added resentment against him, at his obviously proprietory manner toward the girl. While he watched Gore, he heard the tall old man asking, "You must be that man Wilder—the man with the horses across the range?"

The girl looked with quick interest. Gore opened his mouth to say something and then shut it as Wilder said evenly, "They're this side the range now."

Gore yelled, "What!" He edged his horse toward Wilder, his heavy face suffused with red. He asked, "On this side? Hell, I sent my foreman and a couple of men up to tell you not to come across the pass."

Wilder's somber eyes watched Gore. He said, "Yeah, they told me."

Gore looked surprised. Wilder could read his thoughts. Gore couldn't understand how, if he had sent those three killers up to stop him, how Wilder could be here.

Under his breath Gore swore. He said, "Something damn funny here!"

He started to ask a question and then stopped as the drumming hoof-beats of a running horse came to them from the shade of the cottonwoods where a road came out. Out in the open before the house a rider curbed his horse, then came on at a slow walk.

Wilder recognized him as the man who had been with Gore's foreman, and who had carried off the dead man.

GORE exploded. "Hey you, Spike! I told you fellers to keep this man across the pass!"

The man came on slowly, his hard face expressionless, his slit eyes fastened on Wilder. Not taking his eyes from Wilder he spoke from thin lips to Gore. He said,

"This is the son who killed the foreman."

Gore exploded, "What?" Then his face flushed an angry red. He half whispered, "I don't believe it!" he turned, shouting to Wilder, "Then, by God, you must a shot him in the back!"

Wilder spoke calmly, "You're a liar."

Gore started to reach for his gun, and Wilder spoke again. "Don't do it Gore."

The tall old man said warningly, "Take it easy, Gore. Take it easy."

The girl's face had paled. She walked a few steps toward Wilder, asking, "Did you kill the man?"

Wilder kept his eyes on Gore and Spike, not looking at the girl. He nodded his head.

The girl said, "Oh!" Then she asked in a low voice, "But not in the back?"

Wilder spoke to her. "No. He pulled a gun on me and I beat him to it."

Gore yelled, "That ain't possible!"

He looked at his man, Spike, one of his killers. Spike shrugged his shoulders in assent

Then Gore turned on the tall old man. He seemed to be over his flare of loud-mouthed rage and spoke earnestly "Idaho, that ought to settle it for you. I been trying for a long time to git your help to clear things up. The settlers been crowding in, fencing our water, and now this flash gun-slinger crowds in with his horses. I'm asking you a last time, are you going to fight for your own, or are you going to jest set and take it and be put out a business?"

Old Idaho pulled at one end of his long white mustache. He said, "Take it easy, Gore. Take it easy." Then his cold gray eyes shifted to the girl.

An angry flush came to her face as she turned to Gore. "I'm not going to have any fighting." And she added with a withering look at Gore, "The SM is a cow-outfit, not a murder crew."

Gore half shouted at the girl, "Meaning—?" Then he struggled with his anger and spoke in a wheedling voice, "Aw, now, Ann, that ain't no way to talk. I jest ain't going to be run off my range by no sodbusters and no renegade two-bit horse outfit!"

Wilder let that pass, and listened to old Idaho. Idaho said, calmly, "We'll take whatever steps we need to protect ourselves, Gore."

Gore shouted heartily, "Good enough, Idaho!" Then he whirled his horse, evidently not caring to wait for any more remarks from old Idaho or the girl. The hard-faced man called Spike pulled his horse up along side Gore and they rode into the shade of the cottonwoods on a run

Wilder lifted his somber eyes to squint at the sun. It was already half way down to the western horizon. He thought of what the settler, Gorden, had said, "There'll be gunmen on your trail afore sunset." He thought of his three ragged young cowpunchers, drifting the horse herd along down the creek. He had to get back there.

Old Idaho teetered back and forth on his high-heeled boots. There was a faintly quizzical light in the cold gray eyes. He asked, "Well, young feller . . ."

Wilder walked over to his horse, mounted and picked up the reins. In the saddle he looked down at the girl and her old foreman. He shrugged his shoulders, as though matters were settled.

Old Idaho said, "Might as well pull your freight—while you can."

"I'm staying," Wilder said. Then he added resentfully, "I been choused around enough." Suddenly he looked at the girl directly, almost fiercely, "Besides" he told her, "I like it here!" His eyes spoke plainly that she had done that.

THE girl met his look directly, and their eyes clung for a moment. The girl's face began to flush, her eyelids narrowed and she looked away. Suddenly she

was intensely angry. "You're a fool!" she cried. "You crowd in here where you're not wanted, and a lot of innocent people will be shot and killed!"

Wilder flared back at her contemptuously, "Meaning your friend Gore and his killers?"

"He's not my friend—" Then she stopped, bit her lip, threw out a hand in a despairing gesture, saying, "Oh, what's the use!"

Old Idaho put in, "Not a mite in the world Ann. Not a mite in the world."

Abruptly Wilder turned his horse and rode away at a trot, not looking back.

He passed the corrals where horses were pulling hay from a rack. The windmill was in gear, turning slowly, clanking and thumping a steady rythm.

It was the long shadows ahead of him that brought his thoughts away from the girl's arrogant, shapely head and wide violet eyes. He squinted up at the sun and pushed the horse up the long slopes of the hills.

On the open shoulders of the mountain where he had halted on his way down he pulled up again. He felt astonished at the profound quiet. The world seemed to have stopped to watch him. Over the tops of the trees, off to the right he could see the open valley and the house of the settler, Gorden. Five miles away he made out in that clear air, a column of white smoke going straight upward from the chimney.

He thought, "I must get along to where the boys are with the horses," but still he sat there looking out across the land. Then his lithe body stiffened at the sound of a shot.

One shot, down to the right, below him in the direction of the creek. He listened intently as the echo rolled along the side of the mountain. He told himself, "The boys saw a wolf," and didn't believe it.

Then the silence of that still world was shattered once more by a flurry of five or six rifle shots. There was a pause, a few scattered shots, and then the sound of many guns.

Wilder went down the mountain side at a plunging run.

HE SPURRED into the juniper bushes, with the rasping bushes sending up clouds of dust as he hurtled through. The horse drew up his hind legs and slid on his haunches down a steep bank into the sand of a little dry wash.

The shooting had stopped; the world had returned again to its profound silence.

He was, Wilder knew, near the place where the shots had come from. He pulled up the horse to listen but could hear nothing but the whistling breath and heaving flanks of his horse. He turned down the wash at a walk, the horse making no sound in the dry sand, Wilder listening and watching. It was around the second bench that he came on what he had feared.

He had the curious feeling that he had done the same thing before; that he knew what he would find around the bend.

The horse stopped of his own accord as they came around a high, flat-faced rock at the right. His horse pointed his ears forward and snorted, alarmed.

A man lay on his back, both arms spread out. One knee was drawn up. Wilder recognized the rip in the skirt of the chaps and tried not to believe it. He watched a shadow creep down the wash ahead of him, pass over the dead man and go on up the hill. Wilder thought, "It's sunset."

Then he was intent on what might be going on up on the wooded slopes around him. After a while he rode forward and looked down at the dead man. The man had been shot through the back of the head.

It was one of his own young punchers, one of the fine young lads who had followed him, without pay, on a drift of a

thousand miles looking for new land and a new home, looking for room and for peace.

He whispered to his dead friend, "And if its the last thing I do in the world, I'll kill Gore for you!"

Anxiety for the other two men gripped him then. He went on down the wash at a run and pulled up sharply beside a dead horse. It was the young lad's horse. That, too, had been shot.

A little further down he came to three dead horses in a clump. Some of his own horse herd wantonly shot down. He knew now the sort of men he had to deal with. The wanton killing of the horses seemed worse than the killing of the young puncher. That was to be understood, to be expected in a range war. But this. . . .

Wilder pulled away from the wash and rode up a long slope to the left, winding in and out through the juniper bushes, eyes and ears alert. The horse noticed movement as soon as he did, up on the hill to the right on the other side of the wash. Two people on horses were riding at all the speed they could get out of them down through the brush.

Wilder ducked behind a juniper, pulled out the rifle and caught the leading figure in the sight. It was the girl, Ann Fuller.

She was lashing her horse with a quirt, going down the steep slope in stiff legged jumps. Back of her came old Idaho. Even in the fading light Wilder could see that Idaho had the air of being dragged over here against his will and his judgment.

A wave of bitterness swept over Wilder. "Riding hard," he thought. "She wants to be in at the kill!"

He let them get out of sight then spurred his own horse on over the ridge.

Beyond the crest he picked up the trail of his horse herd. The horses, he could see, were being driven; they had been running, running hard.

"I must get to Pete," he thought desperately and his horse laid out nearly flat in a wild, fast run down the slope.

CHAPTER THREE

Outcast Gun Champion

IT WAS almost dark when Jim Wilder caught up with Pete and the herd. On the opposite hillside he saw the backs of the horses, sliding along down through the junipers. They were on the run.

He saw young Pete on a running horse lashing at the herd with a rope end. Not stopping his hores, Pete threw up his rifle at Wilder, then lowered it and waved his hand. He went behind a juniper bush and did not come out the other side.

As Wilder rode up to Pete he heard the question, "Seen the kid?"

Wilder nodded his head, a cold, somber look in his eyes. His lips tightened and he jerked his head backward toward the wash where the dead cowpuncher lay.

Wilder and Pete spurred their horses forward, coming up with the horse herd. The other ragged cowpuncher slid out of the dusk and called to Wilder: "They got the kid. I seen them." He added gloomily, "But I couldn't do nothing."

Wilder's eyes were friendly as he looked into the miserable face of the young fellow. He nodded his head, "Of course not, Joe. Don't take it too hard."

Joe gulped, then he said, "And they went to shooting horses. By Gawd—"

Wilder cut in briskly, "We'll leave the herd here and get down to Gorden's. There's grass and water here, and they'll be safer here than if we run them down close to Gorden's."

They headed the horse herd, looking back at them as they rode away. The horses had stopped and were looking at the men, high headed.

Joe spoke, making his voice indifferent, trying to cover up the death of the Kid and what was ahead of them. He said, "Sure is plenty good for horses."

AT DEEP dusk they pulled up their horses to look cautiously from a fringe of junipers at Gorden's house. They saw a squat log house, with a stick-and-mud chimney at one end. A dim, yellow light came from two small windows in the rear of the house.

Beyond the house stretched a long narrow, open valley where clear water ran and some pole corrals stood. The sweet smell of new cut alfalfa came to them. Across the little valley the black junipers seemed to crowd each other out onto the valley floor, running up steeply to the ridge, and a darkening sky. One clear star shone just above the ridge.

Jim Wilder nodded across the valley, "They'll be over there," he said.

Pete asked, "Who?"

Wilder told him, "Gore and the Crazy K, and more'n likely the SM."

When they came slowly out of the junipers, Pete said, "There's the corral." They unsaddled and left their horses.

They walked toward the house, spurs rattling. Young Joe said, "I don't like no house. How we going to git out?"

A tense, hard voice spoke from the window in the end of the house. "Stand your hand, whoever you are. That's far enough!"

Wilder spoke, "It's Wilder. Tell Gorden."

The voice snarled, "You stay right in your tracks." Then the voice was heard mumbling to someone and feet sounded across a board floor. A minute later Gorden spoke from the window, "That you Wilder? Come around front to the door."

There were two rooms in the house. A fireplace was at the end of one room, a few embers glowing under kettles and skillets. In the other room a small coal-oil lamp dimly shown on the strained faces of women and children. A man was busy with an ax, digging a loophole in the end of the cabin beside the fireplace where there were no windows.

Gorden was talking to the four men in the room. He said, "This is Wilder. I told you about him, and his men." He added, "We're lucky to have him with us."

A man asked, "You're sure of him, ain't you? Know him, don't you?"

Gorden said, "He killed Gore's foreman. What more you want?"

Wilder said, "I thought you had more men."

Gorden spoke contemptously, I thought so, too. But they backed down. They figure if we win, they win too. If we lose, they ain't no worse off than now." He added, "Damn their chicken hearts!"

Wilder walked around looking at the mattresses propped cornerways across the windows, leaving little slits for loop holes. He said, "We can't just stay here. We got to take it to them, come daylight. Then he asked, "How-come it got started so soon?"

"Gore and three of his killers came through here in the early afternoon," Gorden explained. "They were looking for you. Gore told me to pull my freight, so I got busy." Then he asked, hopefully, "Didn't you meet up with him?"

Wilders sombre face hardened. He shook his head, "No." Then he added, "He met up with one of my boys."

There was something in the tone that caused the men in the room to look at him quickly and intently. Wilder added, "So I'm killing Gore."

THE men nodded their heads. Here's a man, their eyes told each other, who has a reason for fighting. They were sorry for the dead young cowpuncher, but they were glad that the surge of hate was in Wilder's heart.

Gorden started to speak, and then they listened to the sound of a shot and the tinkle of falling glass. The glass seemed to fall for an interminable time.

A woman wailed, "Oh, those windows —our windows! And I don't know how

we'll ever be able to have any more."

Gorden spoke soothingly, "There, there, Ma. There are lots more windows."

Mrs. Gorden grumbled, "But I don't see how we're going to get them."

The people in the house were listening intently for more shots. They came soon—rifle shots from across the valley, shots that slapped into the log walls of the cabin. Then two more shots found the windows and the tinkling glass cascaded down. They felt surprise that there could be so much glass in a window.

In the silence that followed a man stirred, restlessly muttering, "We're safe enough in here."

Wilder answered him, "Yeah But being safe won't win a war."

A shout called from the juniper bush back of the house. Somebody muttered, with suppressed excitement, "That's Gore yelling!"

The yell came again and the men in the house slid silently to the mattress covering the back windows. Through the slit left for a rifle loophole Gorden called, "What do you want?"

Gore spoke from the brush, "That you, Gorden?"

Gorden said, "Yes."

Gore said, "Who you got in there with you?"

Gorden answered, "None of your damn business, Gore."

Gore laughed. He spoke in a friendly voice, almost wheedling. "Now look here, Gorden. We ain't really got no fight. I swear we ain't. But you've got that murderer Wilder in there, and we've got to have him. You send him out here and I'll pull off my men and make you no more trouble. You and your friends can stay here till you rot, for all me."

There was a long silence after that. A woman spoke out loud, "So that's all he wants. Jest this Wilder."

Then they bent their heads to listen to Gore again, "How about it? You put Wilder out and we have no more trouble. How about it?"

Gorden snarled, "I know you Gore, and we're sticking together."

A man beside Gorden muttered, hesitatingly, "Well, I dunno. . . "

Young Pete fastened clawlike fingers on the man's shoulder and shook him, asking, angrily, "What don't you know, you damn sodbuster?"

Wilder said, "Shut up, Pete." Then he turned to Gorden. "All right. I'll go out, if you want."

Gorden said, "We don't want."

Two of the others nodded their heads, one saying, "Ain't no use. We know Gore."

The fourth man muttered again, "Well—I dunno."

Gore called again, "What about it?"

Gorden answered, "Go to hell!" He ducked back from the window as yellow gun flame stabbed the night and bullets slapped into the mattress.

A man got down on his knees, shoved a rifle out the window and began firing at the flashes. The acrid powdersmoke drifted back into the room and stung their nostrils. In the other room a little girl began crying.

IN A lull of the shooting they heard another voice call out of the darkness—a woman's angry voice. "Gore! You wait. You stop this shooting. I won't have it!"

A man laughed, raucously, insultingly.

The woman's voice was raised to call to the house. She said, "Oh, Gorden. It's Ann Fuller. I'm coming to the house."

Without waiting for a reply a horse broke out of the brush and came on fast stepping feet. A voice called after her, "Ann—Ann! Don't you do that! You come back!" The girl paid no attention.

She rode around to the front of the house and the people inside looked at each other wonderingly.

"Let me in Gorden. It's Ann Fuller," she repeated.

A man snarled, "Don't!" while Gorden began pulling things away from the door. The man said heatedly, "She's on their side, ain't she? She owns one of the big outfits, don't she? Don't you let her in, I tell you!"

Ma Gorden waddled toward the door, saying, "Fiddlesticks!" And pulled the door open.

Jim Wilder stood beside the door and watched Ann Fuller step up into the room. He saw again the tall slender girl with the heavy brown hair and wide eyes under level brows. In the dim light the eyes seemed black. Something clutched at Jim Wilder's throat.

Wilder watched young Pete slam the door shut and help Gorden pile things back against it. Then he turned to listen to the girl. He was surprised to find that she was looking directly at him, talking to him. Suddenly, it seemed to Jim Wilder, as he and the girl looked at each other, that there were no other people in the house, or in the world.

Ma Gorden waddled in and her voice filled the room. "Why Ann Fuller," she was saying, "ain't I glad to see you! Come in the other room with us, dear." Jim Wilder and Ann Fuller did not hear her.

The girls eyes flickered and a slow flush crept up over her face. She asked, "Did you hear me?"

Wilder's hawk-like face creased into a grin. He shook his head.

The girl repeated crisply, "I want to buy your horses!"

That got through to Jim Wilder and he stared at the girl.

The girl spoke angrily, "Do you hear? I want to buy your horses. How much do you want for the herd? I'll pay cash."

Wilder asked, "Why?"

The girl answered, "What's that got to do with it? I'll buy the herd, and then you can get out—get away!" After a minute she added, as an afterthought, "Besides, we need horses."

Wilder's dark face creased into a slow smile as his eyes held the girl. He shook his head, saying, "But I don't want to get away. I like it here."

The girl flared out at him. "And you brought all this trouble with you!"

The settler who had been suspicious of Wilder—the one who kept saying, "Well, I dunno"—seemed now to have made up his mind His name was Brown. He broke in hurriedly, "That's what I think, and I said it"

Pete asked truculently, "Yeah?"

Without taking his eyes from the girl Wilder said, "Shut up, Pete."

Pete said, "Oh, hell!"

The girl asked again, "Will you sell and get out?"

Wilder said, "No."

The girl flared out at him angrily, "Then you're a fool!" She turned to Gorden, giving orders arrogantly. "I can't do anything more. If this man won't sell, there is nothing to do. Open the door. I'm going back."

A SETTLER stepped forward briskly to pull things away from the door. Then with arms outstretched he stopped and stood with his head on his shoulder at the whiplike crack of Wilder's voice. Wilder said, "Wait." He turned to the girl. "I'm sorry," he said, "but you're staying here tonight."

Her head was thrown back. She seemed scarcely to believe that she could have heard aright, "What?" she asked, "What was that you said?"

Wilder said again, his voice brittle. "You're staying here until daylight."

She took a step toward him, her quirt half raised as though she would slash him with it. With flaming eyes she asked him, "What do you mean?" Then, without waiting for an answer, she turned to the settler. "Open that door."

The man sprung into action, saying, "Sure, Miss Fuller—sure!"

Pete took the man by the shoulders and yanked him back, hard. Then Pete and Joe leaned, quite nonchalantly, against the pile of stuff that hid the door. Pete was grinning

The girl's eyes grew stormy. Nothing like this had ever happened to her. She was the sole owner of the SM, the biggest outfit in the region. All her life the men of this country had sprung quickly to obey her slightest wish. And here was a lean dark, hawk-faced man, a stranger, who was telling her what she could do and what she could not do!

She ordered again, "Open that door!"

Young pete grinned and told her, "Sorry, lady."

Then Jim Wilder was talking. "You see, while you are here the women and children in the house are safe. But if you leave, your friend Gore will very probably kill them."

She flared out at that, "He's not my friend." Then she bit her lip in exasperation at the remark. "Are you going to open that door?" she asked again, trying to control the anger in her voice.

But Wilder's calm, "No" was drowned out in a call from outside. The voice was saying, "It's me—Idaho. I'm coming to the house."

Gorden stepped to a loophole and answered, "All right, Idaho. But you come alone!"

Idaho answered. "That's all right. I'm alone. Got my hands up if you want 'em that way."

They stood as they were in the house, listening to the sound of Idaho's horse. Then they were suddenly surprised to hear Idaho talking quite close to them, just outside the door. He was saying, "Hey, Ann—Ann. You there, Ann?"

They all looked at the girl and waited. Waited and wondered what she would say. They realized, suddenly, all of them, that what she said to Idaho would be of enormous importance to them.

Idaho asked again, "You there, Ann?" Then he said, "When you coming out?"

The girl stood in the middle of the floor, looking at the door. She drew in her breath, her lips parted as though about to speak.

Then she stopped to listen again as Idaho asked anxiously, "Hey, Ann. They ain't trying to keep you in there, be they?"

The room was completely silent as they waited for the answer. The girl opened her lips again and closed them. Then, suddenly, she spoke crisply, clearly. "Of course not, Idaho. No. I'm staying the night with Mrs. Gorden." After a minute she added, "And Idaho—you make Gore stop that shooting. You hear me?"

They waited a long time for Idaho's answer. They heard him turn his horse, speaking casually, "Sure, Ann. Good idea." And he rode away

The people in the house let out their breaths in a long-drawn sigh of relief.

CHAPTER FOUR

One-Man War

THE night seemed endless. The women had gone into the other room and shut the door, and the fire in the fireplace slowly died into a bed of white ashes. Gorden had picked up the smoky lantern from the floor in the middle of the room and had blown it out. "We ain't got much oil," he'd muttered as he did so.

The seven men—the four settlers and Wilder with his two ragged young cowpunchers—stood guard in turn at the four sides of the cabin, straining their ears in the darkness to pick up any movement from the besiegers.

When off guard, Wilder, Pete and Joe sat on the floor backs against the wall and caught snatches of weary sleep. The

settlers grouped against the wall on the other side of the room, spending a lot of time whispering together. Above them, Wilder heard the urgent whisper of the man, Brown, arguing and pleading.

Bitterness filled Wilder. Already he saw clearly the gulf between him and the settlers. Gorden was all right, he thought, but Brown was now definitely against making a fight, and he was persuading the others. "The fools" Wilder thought, "Don't they know their only chance in the world is to clear up Gore and his killers?"

A baby in the other room woke up and began crying in a subdued hopeless wail. It went on and on while a woman made hushing noises, then, after a long time she began walking the floor. The boards creaked under her tread. The baby kept on crying.

Wilder, sitting on the floor with his back against the wall was intensely awake. He did not want to sleep. He wanted to stay awake and think of the girl, Ann Fuller. And that, too, filled him with bitterness

He could see clearly, in his mind, her wide eyes, her arrogantly held little head. He felt one swift surge of happiness as he remembered she had, at the last, stayed of her own accord. Then he thought, depressed, "But that was for the women; to keep Gore from shooting up the house."

He was irritated when young Pete put his lips close to his ear and began whispering. He wanted to sit there in the darkness and dream of the girl. It probably was, he thought, the last night of his life, and he wanted it all for his own.

YOUNG Pete was whispering insistently, "Hey Jim—Jim. This ain't looking so good to me. I think them sodbusters is going to pull out on us. What you think?"

Wilder nodded his head but Pete couldn't see that and asked again, "What you think?"

Wilder said, out loud, "I know it."

His voice sounded enormous in the dark room. The settlers who had been whispering excitedly were silenced suddenly, and seemed to be waiting for Wilder's voice to go on. After a few minutes they began whispering again, very low and cautiously.

Pete whispered, irritably, "I wish that damn kid would quit bawling."

Later Pete asked, "What we going to do, come daylight?"

Wilder knew the answer to that. "I'm going out and kill Gore," he said.

Pete asked, "Think these sodbusters is a going to help?"

Wilder said, "I don't need help."

Pete whispered, "But that gang of killers will git you, afterward."

Wilder shrugged at that. He knew quite well that was what would happen. But he had the profound conviction he would live long enough to do that job. He had to. It couldn't be otherwise.

He thought of his young cowpuncher, the kid, lying up there in the wash, shot through the back of the head, dead. He was perfectly certain he would kill Gore.

Then Wilder was astonished that he could dimly see the two settlers across the room. He stirred uneasily, stretched his arms, saying to Pete, "Well here it is—daylight."

One of the settlers built a fire, and the smoke came out into the room. The man said, "Damn that chimney!" Then the chimney began to draw, the fire crackled and the smoke drew up out of the room.

Ma Gorden waddled in from the other room. She said, "My-My!" and began rattling tin dishes. The smell of boiling coffee filled the room. Men cleared their throats and spat into the fireplace.

She picked up a pail of water and started for the other room, and Gorden spoke to her, "Go easy on that water, Ma."

The woman made a snorting noise and closed the door after her.

Wilder and his two punchers, Pete and Joe, all sensed a very different attitude now in the early morning. It was the cold dawn when enthusiasm and hopes are at a low ebb. With the exception of Gorden, the settlers were distinctly unfriendly The long night of chill and watchfulness, the endless whispering of the settler, Brown, the wailing of the sick baby had worked on them.

The settlers kept to themselves on one side of the fireplace; Wilder and his men on the other side. The settlers were quiet now, carefully avoiding looking at Wilder and his men.

PETE sat in his heels drinking hot coffee from a scalding cup and staring insolently at the settlers. The age-old hatred of the nomadic stockman for the agricultural settler, was seething now in the hearts of Wilder and his two punchers.

Wilder spoke to Pete. "If I don't come out of it, you and Joe are to have the horses."

Joe spoke up, "If you don't come out of it, me and Pete will be right with you."

Pete grinned, talking to Joe, "You don't talk much, Joe," he said, "But you sure know what to say when you do."

Wilder looked at Pete sombrely. "You heard me. You'll do what I say." It was not so much an order, as a simple statement of fact.

Pete grinned

The settler, Brown, drew down the corners of his mouth, asking Wilder in a whining voice, "What you aiming to do?"

Wilder spoke quietly. "Kill Gore."

The settlers turned their heads to look at him, startled. Pete and Joe went on drinking coffee, indifferent. Killing Gore was, to Pete and Joe, a matter of course.

Then Wilder looked up to see the girl, Ann Fuller, standing in the door. She had, he thought, heard what he said. He hoped so, anyway.

She was looking at him. Their eyes clung, and the girl flushed a little. She asked:

"Now will you sell your horses?"

Wilder spoke coldly. "No."

The girl made a gesture of hopeless exasperation, and turned back into the other room. Wilder's eyes followed her broodingly.

When he could no longer see her he turned to the settlers, asking, "Well, what you going to do? Fight—or be run out of the country?"

Gorden spoke quickly, "I'm for fighting! We'll never have a better chance to git free of these cow outfits."

Pete grinned, telling Gorden admiringly, "Why, you're man enough to be a cowman your own-self!"

Wilder said, "Shut up, Pete."

Brown broke in, heatedly. "We ain't goin' to do no fighting. We was fools, gitting into this mess. And Gore says he ain't goin' to bother us. We're taking his word."

Gorden cursed Brown, yelling at him, "And these men? We asked them to help us, didn't we? We asked them into it, didn't we? And now you're laying down on us, you—"

Brown wagged his head, answering sullenly, "That's all right—."

Ma Gorden's bulk filled the door as she spoke, "You—Gorden. You stick to your word or I'm quitting you! You hear me?"

Gorden spoke mildly, "That's all right, Ma. I'm sticking."

Ma Gorden spoke over her shoulder as she turned away. "You better!"

Pete chuckled, calling after her, "I could kiss you, Ma."

Ma Gorden gave a fat chuckle, "You try it young feller, and see what happens to you!"

The man watching from the back window drew in his breath and spoke excitedly, "There's Gore! He's talking."

Wilder went to the back window to listen, pulling the settler roughly away. He had, now, no use for them.

Across the open flat he could see the fringe of black juniper trees. There was no one in sight. Then he heard Gore yelling. "Hey, you in the house. What about it? You fellers walk out in the open, and we let you go. What about it?"

Back of him Wilder heard the settler, Brown, whisper excitedly, "That's what I said. That's the thing for us!"

Wilder spoke from the window. "You, Gore. This is Wilder. What about my boys?"

Pete began cursing. He cursed Wilder and Gore and the settlers, ending up with, "You can't do it, Jim Wilder. You can't do it!"

Wilder listened, waiting for Gore to answer. Finally Gore said, "All right. But they come out without guns, and with their hands up."

Pete laughed then, a reckless laugh that came shrill and high. He said, "Try and do it!"

BACK of him, Wilder heard things being pulled away from the door, and then the snarl of Pete. "Drop it!" He looked over his shoulder and saw Pete and Joe, guns in their hands, standing back of the doors, facing the three settlers.

Wilder spoke sharply, "Stop it, Pete. Get away from the door. Let them go."

Pete made no move, and Wilder lashed out at him, "Get away from that door!"

Pete said hopelessly, "Oh, hell!" He and Joe came away.

The settlers hurriedly got the door open. They stopped a minute and looked around the room. They said to Gorden, "You better come. It's our only chance."

Gorden stood by the fireplace, a rifle in the crack of his arm. His face red with anger, he cursed them bitterly.

The men went out the door with their hands up. They walked off away from the cabin, walked into the first golden rays of the rising sun.

Wilder called from the window, "Hey, Gore. I suppose it's me you want?"

Gore said, "And I'm damn sure going to git you!"

Wilder jeered at him, asking, "If you've got the guts, why don't you come out and fight me, man to man?"

There was no answer to that for a long time. Wilder jeered again. "You haven't got the nerve, eh? I'll give you my word that you won't get plugged from the house, if that's what's scaring you. I'll go out first, then you come out. You can come with a gun in your hand, if you want to."

Men were talking in the brush when Gore flared out, "By Gawd, I'll do it!"

Wilder turned to face the room and listen to a wild jumble of protests. Pete, Joe and Gorden were talking to him all at the same time. Talking angrily, pleading, then cursing.

Then Wilder saw the girl, Ann Fuller standing in the door, looking at him. There was a deep unfathomable look in her eyes. At last she shook her head. "Don't do it" she said. "You can't trust him. I know."

Wilder shrugged. "But I've got to go," he told her. "It's the only way out for these people."

The girl's lips curled. She asked, "Are they worth it?"

Wilder shrugged at that too, telling her, "That's not the point."

Gore yelled again, "Come out, Wilder; come out and git killed."

Wilder asked the girl, "What's Idaho going to do?"

The girl said, "Nothing."

Wilder walked to the door and looked out across the pleasant little valley. The level sun had turned the trees on the ridges to a dull gold. The morning was fresh, cool and clear.

Wilder thought, "It'll get hot after

awhile—but I won't see it." A surge of intense bitterness swept over him. "To come to this!"

HE PULLED the six-shooter from the holster and looked at it. He spun the cylinder, then shoved it back down in the holster. Pete and Joe were just behind him, rifles in their hands.

He shook his head at them, his lean, hawk face creasing into a friendly grin. "Nothing doing" he told them. "You'll stay here and look after these people." And again he said, "If I don't get back, you boys are to have the horses."

Pete said, "We're going with you."

Wilder shook his head. "Can't be done, Pete. You stay here." Then he added, softly, "Please."

Pete snarled angrily, "Ain't ary other word you could of said that would of made me do it."

A raucous yell came again from the brush. "You coming out Wilder, or you keeping hid behind women's skirts?"

The girl was still standing in the doorway, looking at him, intently. Wilder stood a minute, looking at her, holding her eyes, thinking, "I shall never see her again."

He turned then, shrugged his shoulders and stepped out into the sunlight.

Off to the right the three settlers stood in a row, their heads still held high. Wilder's lips curled as he walked the other way, out past the corner of the cabin and faced the dark line of juniper trees. His face was stiff, his eyes watchful, the hard, cold eyes of a killer

It was then that he saw Gore come out of the brush on foot, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt.

Wilder started to walk toward him, watching him, every faculty intensely alert. He thought, "I'm going to kill him. Nothing on earth can stop that now!"

A gun flared from the brush behind Gore. Something struck Wilder and knocked him half around. He saw Gore suddenly smile, and go for his gun.

Wilder shot from the hip, and knew that men were coming out of the brush, shooting at him as they came. He saw Gore jerk himself up as trying to stand on tiptoe. He slumped down on one knee and shot at Gore again. Something flicked the side of his head and warm wetness ran into his eyes.

He thought, "It's hot" and wiped his eyes. His fingers were red.

He wiped his eyes again but couldn't see Gore. Gore was gone. "Ran away," Wilder thought. Then he saw Gore on the ground, sprawling out, clutching at the grass with frantic fingers. Wilder shot again, and Gore lay still. . . .

A gun went over Wilder's head and he swore, "Damn you, Pete!" He turned to look. It was the girl, Ann Fuller.

She was standing over him, working the lever of a Winchester, calmly shooting at Gore's killers.

He yelled at her, then reached up and grabbed her, yanking her onto the ground. He tried to stand up, to walk in front of her, but he found he couldn't get up. He heard rifles going off over his head, and heard Pete laugh.

Then a great shout came from off to the right. Wilder got to his knees and wiped his bloody eyes. He saw old Idaho on a running horse, and back of him pounded the men of the SM. Old Idaho was shooting a rifle from the running horse, shooting and yelling. And Gore's men were running for the brush, except for some who would never run again. The SM men, on wildly plunging horses, were driving into the brush after the renegades.

Wilder wanted to ask the girl, "You hurt?" but it didn't seem worth while. He was too tired. Nothing really mattered, anyway.

The next thing Wilder knew he was looking directly up into the girl's eyes. After a little he tried to think things

over. Then he remembered he had killed Gore.

He realized, at last, that his head was in the girl's lap. She was talking to someone, talking hurriedly. She was saying, "You send one of the boys to town for the doctor. Quick."

Wilder shifted his eyes to look up at Idaho. The old man was teetering back and forth on his high heels, pulling at his white mustache, "Done sent for the doc, Ann. Done sent for him."

Ann said briskly, "We'll get Jim Wilder on a horse and take him to the ranch."

Old Idaho's eyes twinkled. He nodded. "And I hope he stays there."

The girl looked at old Idaho and flushed a little. She met Wilder's eyes for an instant, and said very softly, "I hope so, too!"

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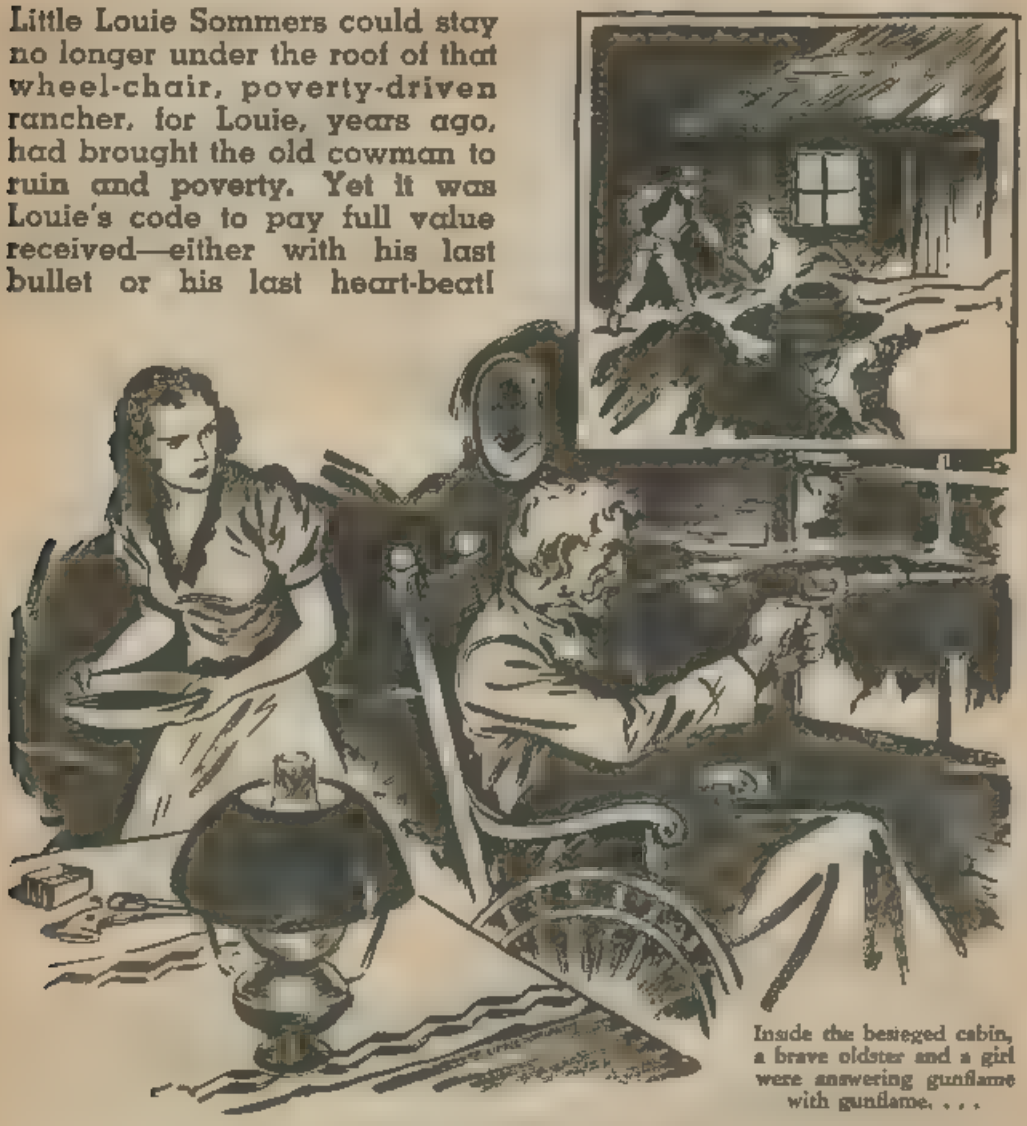
Gun-Guest's Welcome

Little Louie Sommers could stay no longer under the roof of that wheel-chair, poverty-driven rancher, for Louie, years ago, had brought the old cowman to ruin and poverty. Yet it was Louie's code to pay full value received—either with his last bullet or his last heart-beat!



Inside the besieged cabin, a brave oldster and a girl were answering gunflame with gunflame. . . .

By Norman A. Fox

IT WAS no place for a fight. The trail, following a ledge that zig-zagged high above boulder-studded Crazy Creek, was dangerously narrow. So Little Louie Sommers, facing the group who blocked his way, drew his horse to a standstill and prepared to bluff. But something whispered that Lash Trask and his men weren't going to be bluffed. This was showdown.

That thought stiffened Little Louie's saddle-weary muscles, although he had been prepared for trouble. Since he had put the town of Piney Buttes behind him in the darkness, he had sensed the presence of unseen horsemen. Now it was no surprise to find who led those riders. Only one man would figure why Little Louie had headed straight for the badlands when the gates of Deer Lodge had swung open for the ex-convict two weeks before. And

that man was Lash Trask, who hated him.

Screwing his seamed face into a grin, Little Louie nodded and tried to make his voice cheerful. "How are yuh, Lash," he said. "Funny that the first friend I run across after I leave the big house is the last one I saw before I went in "

Trask matched his grin, moved half-a-horse forward. Loose stones went slithering over the lip of the ledge

"Yeah, damn funny," Trask commented. "It might be even funnier if we was both looking for the same thing, eh?"

"Meanin'?" Little Louie asked.

But he knew what Lash Trask meant as he stared at the big outlaw who towered above him, solid and bulky as an ox.

They were an oddly contrasted pair. Little Louie still wore the prison pallor while Trask, naturally swarthy, was almost sun-blackened. But something about Little Louie made him bigger than Trask. It was in his eyes. It hinted that if both men were put to the fire, Louie Sommers would harden, while Lash Trask melted.

They had been partners once. Little Louie remembered that as he realized that soon now one of them might kill the other. Long ago they had gutted the bank at Piney Buttes. Something had gone wrong that day and the bullets of the law had goaded them on their separate trails from town

Louie thought of it now—the chase that had ended in his capture, the sweltering days in the courtroom, the monotonous days behind walls that shut out the sunlight. . . . Gray days when he had figured out that Lash Trask had double-crossed him.

THOSE fifteen bitter years thronged through Little Louie's mind before he heard Lash Trask answer his challenging question.

"Meanin' that I know you got the bank's money. And I know you hid it someplace around here. You made a bee-line for Piney Buttes after the warden kissed you good-bye—and I was right behind you. You had a chance to hide a map in town before you was caught. Last night you got that map and slipped away. I ain't takin' a chance on you slippin' away again. I figgered fifteen years ago on having that money for myself. I still figger that way!"

"And that," said Little Louie evenly, "is why you risked your neck to call on me at the pen—pretendin' you was my friend. That's why you was always hinting that you might be able to get me out if you had some coin to work with. I was wise, Lash."

"You catch on easy-like," Trask admitted, grinning. "Better fork over that map, Louie "

Five men backed Lash Trask, crowding a spot where the ledge broadened for a dozen feet. Little Louie shrugged, reached for his coat pocket—but not for the map. He had sat in a poker game with the ten dollars that Montana gives released convicts. He had come out of that game with money enough for range garb, a cayuse and a bone-handled .45. When his hand snaked into view again that .45 slammed lead at Trask and his riders.

The trail offered no cover, no room for a quick turn and retreat. With the gun bucking in his hand, Little Louie knew he was going to die.

But Little Louie had decided that it was better to go out fighting than to hand over that map to Lash Trask. The bank loot meant a lot to the ex-convict. The thought of it had kept him patient through fifteen long years.

He hadn't been any kid when they sent him to Deer Lodge. Now he was crowding sixty, a prison-broken man, with his best years behind him. The money would take care of him in the time that was left. It was his—earned, according to his code, the hard way.

Now the thought of his future made him oblivious to the lead that whined in search

of him. Then he saw Trask's gun blossom fire and something slammed against the side of Little Louie's head. Smothering darkness began to blanket him. He was finished, and Trask was going to get the map!

Then, with his strength ebbing fast he kicked free of the stirrups, flung himself out and over the ledge. Crazy Creek, a boulder-fanged menace, seemed to soar upward to meet him as darkness swallowed him. . . .

THE music of lapping waters reached Little Louie's ears when he fought his way back to consciousness again. The upper half of his body was stretched upon a sandbar, while his legs dangled in the stream.

The overhanging cliff concealed the sandbar from the trail above, but that didn't concern Little Louie. Running a hand along his throbbing head, he felt encrusted blood. Mechanically he washed it away, but he couldn't wash the cobwebs fogging his mind.

Little Louie Sommers had never heard of amnesia, so he didn't know that Lash Trask's bullet had done something to him. The slug had creased his head, then had winged onward—but in its passing it had robbed the ex-convict of all memory.

He only knew that one leg pained him and his right arm felt as though it had been torn from its socket. Skirting the deeper pool that had caught him in his fall, he splashed through the shallow creek, and gained the farther bank. Sick and bewildered, he commenced to drag himself along a pine-shadowed trail. His clothes seemed to weigh him down so he wriggled from his coat, dropped it beside the trail.

When the sun dipped behind distant hills he saw a light ahead. It spurred him to renewed effort, but it seemed hours before he squirmed into the clearing near the cabin whose window he had seen. He tried to muster strength to shout and then he sobbed aloud as a door swung open, etching a rectangle of friendly light against the gloom.

"That's just about far enough, Mister," a man's voice rasped.

"But Dad," he heard a girl say. "That isn't any of Lash Trask's men. It's a stranger—and he's hurt!"

Little Louie fought off the recurrent dizziness as the girl half-dragged, half-carried him into the cabin. When she finally managed to ease him into a bunk he was able to smile his thanks. She was a dark, lovely creature with cascading blue-black hair. Across the room sat the man who had challenged Louie, a grizzled oldster with steady eyes.

"Now don't you try talking," the girl admonished Louie. "I'm going to see if that leg of yours is broken—and the inspection is liable to hurt."

Little Louie didn't mind the agony that followed. He was probing the shadows, following a nebulous trail that had begun when the girl had spoken the name of Lash Trask. That name meant something to him—but what?

When the girl announced that his leg was not broken but badly wrenched he scarcely heard her. He had partially pierced the veil. Lash Trask had waited for him on the trail. They had fought, and he had leaped into Crazy Creek. Why?

Little Louie didn't know but he had a vague feeling that his danger wasn't over. Lash Trask would be looking for him.

He was still trying to figure it out when the girl bandaged his head, draped a blanket over him, and he fell into a fitful slumber. When the smell of sizzling bacon awoke him in the morning he found that his head no longer throbbed. But the past was still a blank save for that one tantalizing picture of the battle on the cliff's edge.

THE girl was busy at a stove and the man still sat as though he had not moved through the night. With the morn-

ing sunlight streaming through the window, Little Louie saw that the oldster was in a wheelchair. That fact told him why the girl had brought him into the cabin unaided. Little Louie coughed, and the girl turned toward him with a smile.

"My name is Joan Shanley," she said. "This is my father."

"I'm—I'm—" Little Louie began, and found that he couldn't finish. How the devil could he tell these folks that he couldn't remember his own name? "I'm Pete Smith," he ended lamely.

"Reckon I was sorta hasty last night," the oldster apologized. "They's a bunch of unhung hellions hereabouts that's pestered my gal once or twice. Thought you was one of them at first."

Little Louie said nothing. He could feel that the pair was waiting for him to talk, to explain how he had come to their door. But all Little Louie knew was that he had dragged himself from a sandbar after a fight with Lash Trask. That wouldn't sound like much of a story.

So he remained silent while the girl brought him food, helped him eat. Then she insisted on changing his bandage and fussing with his leg. It was all very amazing to Little Louie.

His amazement grew as many days of such kindness followed, and then the hospitality of the Shanleys began to trouble Little Louie. That blankness in his mind obliterated all memory of the rough outlaw companionship of his yesterdays, and made him forget the surly penitentiary guards. But subconsciously the ex-convict knew that a genuine hand of friendship was a new experience, and by the same medium he sensed that he didn't deserve such consideration.

That feeling became bitter certainty one sun-drenched afternoon.

CARL SHANLEY had wheeled his chair down a ramp and into the clearing. Little Louie could watch him through the open door, and as he studied the oldster's face a memory began to stir itself alive. He was seeing a proud, square-shouldered man riding up the lone street of Piney Buttes. . . . The Carl Shanley of yesterday. Following the thought, Little Louie began to remember other things, things that had to do with the old days. Finally he spoke to Joan.

"You'll figger I'm plumb nosey, especially since you ain't asked me any questions," he began, "but I'm wondering if your dad ain't the gent that ran the big Rafter S spread in this section, quite a spell ago—mebby fifteen years."

It took the girl a long moment to speak. "Yes," she said. "An outlaw bronc spilled dad. . . . Knocked him off the top of the heap. Of course, I was just a tot when it happened. Seems like he had a couple of dry years along with some wholesale rustling. Just about every sort of bad luck happened and then, to make it worse, the horse threw him, and he hurt his back. He never walked again. When he saw that the Rafter S was as good as lost, he took what money he had and came here. At first there was our old cook from the ranch to do the things dad couldn't do. . . . Then, there was just dad and me, all by ourselves."

Her eyes were misty and Little Louie found himself strangely moved. It was tough that those things had to happen to people like the Shanleys. "Reckon it takes money to stay in the cow-business," he muttered. "Too bad your dad lost his."

She nodded. "He might have weathered all the hard luck, if we'd had backing. But dad sold his primest stock just before the trouble started. Two gents stuck up the bank where he'd salted his money. They caught one and sent him to the pen—a man called Louie Sommers. He wouldn't tell where the money was—said his partner had it. It busted the bank. . . . And in the long run, it busted us, too."

And this time memory came to Little

Louie like a blow between the eyes. Just as a flash of lightning will instantly illuminate miles of storm-swept prairie, so Little Louie suddenly knew who had robbed the bank at Piney Buttes. And he knew another thing, too, an alien thing to him—a sense of overwhelming shame. It made him want to hobble through the door and away from the home of the Shanleys.

But he couldn't leave till his leg was better. So Little Louie lay in the bunk and did a lot of thinking for himself. He remembered quite a bit now—the holdup, snatches of the trial, and some of his prison days.

It occurred to Louie that he had never really done much thinking before. Even in prison, with time to burn, he had wasted his hours marking time until release day—marking time until he could find that hidden money.

Now it was dawning on Louie that the money wasn't his, even though he had sweated for fifteen long years. He had reasoned that a man who was willing to risk sticking up a bank was entitled to what he took. Bank money was legitimate loot for men like Little Louie Sommers. But he was beginning to realize that bank money really belonged to depositors, folks who had gotten it the hard way; decent folks—like the Shanleys

SLICING away more shadows, he remembered why he had come back to Piney Buttes, and he toyed with the notion of returning the loot. Banks kept records. The depositors would be paid off—including these people who had given him a chance to live. It would be tough to give up all that coin so that the Shanleys, and folks like them, might get their share, but Little Louie had a hunch they wouldn't take it any other way.

But where was the money? The answer still lay back in the shadows. It tortured Little Louie to think about it, because he knew that he should be able to go right to the spot where the money was buried. He hadn't needed that map he had cached in Piney Buttes. Getting it had only been an added precaution. But now the map was in the coat he had thrown away—and the memory was lost along another tangled trail.

Little Louie was still thinking about it when he hobbled out of the cabin the next day. The little dwelling centered a clearing but two stately pines had been left standing like silent sentinals. Between them, Little Louie could see the pronged skyline of the Piney Buttes. He could have told, almost to the mile, the distance to the fork where Crazy Creek emptied into the Missouri. He could have named a dozen nearby landmarks. But he couldn't remember the one spot that had crowded his mind for fifteen years.

Carl Shanley was outside again, and he grinned a welcome as Little Louie hobbled toward him. "Reckon yuh find it nice to walk again," the old fellow commented. "Used to think I'd like tuh try it myself."

"Maybe you will, someday," Little Louie said, because he could think of nothing better.

The old man shook his head. "They used to be a specialist down Denver way," he said. "He figgered he could do the job, but he wanted a helluva lot of money."

He jerked his head toward the cabin. "My gal," he went on. "She was just a kid, then. I couldn't gamble what money I had—with her to take care of."

And Little Louie, listening in silence, knew that he was going to leave—pronto. A wheelchair was a lot like prison, he decided, and he had sentenced Carl Shanley to a wheelchair when he had gutted the bank at Piney Buttes. Hell, another mouthful of Shanley food would gag him.

He blurted his intention of going on to the old man, and he lied when Shanley quizzed him about his condition. When Shanley finally asked Joan to saddle a

horse, Little Louie gritted his teeth that he might not show his pain and swung into the saddle. Then Carl Shanley reached beneath the blanket that draped his legs and extended a gun.

"Yuh might need this," he said. "Yuh can keep it—I've got a dozen. But I'm asking yuh to send the hoss back as soon as yuh can. It's our whole gosh-darned saddle string."

He raised his hand for a parting grip. "My gal tells me yuh knew me in the old days," he said and grinned wryly. "I wouldn't have wasted much time on a gent with a prison haircut and callin' hisself Pete Smith. Bein' at the bottom of the pile since, I've sorta learned what it's like to get the tough breaks. So long and good luck—partner!"

Wordlessly, Little Louie pressed the hand of father and daughter and turned the horse toward the back trail. There had been a lot of things he wanted to say to the pair but Carl Shanley's parting words had locked his lips. Shanley thought he was an escaped convict—yet he was giving Little Louie a chance! You can't thank that kind of man with words, so he rode away in silence. But with him rode one goading desire. He had to give Carl Shanley a chance, too!

HE'D find that last turn in the forgotten trail to yesterday. He had to. The money was going back to the bank so that Carl Shanley could have his operation and start up again in the cow business. That was the least Little Louie could do for Carl Shanley and Joan.

And his own future? He'd get himself a job swamping in some saloon. That would be easy work compared to Deer Lodge. Or maybe Carl Shanley would let him flunkey around the ranch. Little Louie would get along somehow.

Eyes glued to the trail, he searched for his lost coat as he rode along. And while his eyes scanned the one trail, his brain was busy seeking to pierce the last shadow on the other. He had to remember where he had hidden that loot!

Night came, and a rising moon tried to spear through the clouds that topped the eastern hills. The search for the coat had been in vain, but Louie jogged along, oblivious to his surroundings, his mind still intent upon that second trail. Then he found himself jerked to deadly reality as bulky figures loomed before him and the voice of Lash Trask cut through the darkness

"Take a look, boys," the outlaw said. "See what's come back from the dead."

Here was the actuality of the danger that had been so nebulous in the Shanley cabin As Little Louie stabbed for his gun, a vagrant moonbeam suddenly glinted on six leveled weapons. Trask and his men crowded close.

"Don't try it, Louie," Trask's cold voice advised. "You look so much like crow-bait now I'd hate to waste a bullet on you. Ain't lookin' for that map, are you, Louie?"

"Maybe I am," Little Louie said cautiously.

"So was we," Trask told him. "We figgered your carcass had been washed down Crazy Creek and we followed it plumb into Piney Buttes. Spent days combing that misguided river. When we couldn't find hide nor hair of you we turned back. Less than an hour ago one of the boys picked up your coat. You must have been plumb out of your head when you threw your coat away, Louie. The map was sewed inside it!"

"You—you found the coat!" Louie ejaculated.

"Shore. That's why I ain't bothering you. You never meant nothing to me, one way or the other. The gold is what I wanted and now I'm going to get it. We'll save our lead in case we have any trouble. Move along, Louie, and keep your hand away from your hog-leg."

Little Louie moved along. There was nothing else to do.

He knew that he should be thankful that Lash Trask, drunk with triumph, had spared his life. But instead, bitterness choked Little Louie. Trask had the map. Trask would find the money. Now none of it would ever be returned to the Shanleys.

Carl Shanley would sit in his wheelchair before the cabin as long as he lived. Little Louie tried to close his eyes against such a picture, but it persisted—and it brought with it another picture. The cabin!

The last shadow on the trail to yesterday was dissolving, and as it faded it brought the sickening realization of why Lash Trask was saving his bullets.

Now Little Louie could remember it all! When he had hidden the money he had picked a spot with an impressive, unforgettable background. Later that setting had attracted the eye of home-seeking Carl Shanley. The two sentinel-like pines had been untouched and the skyline of the buttes was the same, but the cabin had fooled Little Louie for it had been built since he left the section. And the cabin stood over the very spot where he had buried the money!

Lash Trask had the map, and was heading to that location!

The thought sent Little Louie fogging along the back-trail in hell-goaded desperation. The money no longer mattered. A crippled man and a slender girl would be in deadly peril when Lash Trask forced his way into that cabin—and those two were the only people who had ever been decent to Little Louie Sommers.

Long before he reached the clearing he heard the staccato bark of six-shooters and the sound brought him joy. It was silence he had feared. Crashing guns meant that the Shanleys hadn't been taken by surprise. Little Louie knew the caliber of Carl Shanley. That wheelchair warrior would show the outlaws a fight before they crossed his threshold with flaming guns.

That fight was waging hot when Little Louie reached the clearing. Moonlight, stabbing through the hooded sky, outlined the dim forms of Trask's men scattered in a wide semi-circle as they hammered the log walls with lead. From the window, gunflame answered gunflame as one brave oldster and a girl no less courageous made their last, desperate stand.

LITTLE LOUIE counted quickly. Already a Trask man was down, but the outcome of the battle was obvious. The Shanleys had only one advantage—the cabin's walls. Little Louie knew how that advantage would be overcome. Even as he hesitated beneath one of the giant pines he heard Lash Trask bark a savage command to the four men.

"Save your lead, you fools. We'll torch 'em out!"

Trask was at the outer edge of the circle, crouching beyond range of the flying lead. Little Louie saw a pinpoint of light as a match flared, saw the flame blossom as Trask ignited a torch he had constructed. Then the outlaw leader snaked toward the building—and Little Louie shot him dead before he reached it.

It was a signal for hell to break loose. When Trask fell, his men stood paralyzed for a single moment, a moment that Little Louie used to trigger his gun savagely and effectively. But his gunflame betrayed his location and he found himself the target for every outlaw's weapon as the four concentrated on wiping out this new menace.

A wild whoop from the cabin told that the Shanleys had recognized him as an ally. The guns of the besieged burst forth anew and Trask's men were caught in a cross-fire that dropped two of them. But the others had marked out Little Louie.

Bullets were finding the ex-convict. In a haze of pain he jerked the trigger, wishing that his arm weren't so stiff, wishing that his leg didn't feel like it would give

any minute. He thought that he saw one of the men drop before him even as a bullet branded his side. Then thunderous silence seemed to smother him.

It wasn't right, that silence. Little Louie couldn't understand it. The night should be a hideous din of blasting, searing confusion. His own gun might be empty but why weren't the others firing?

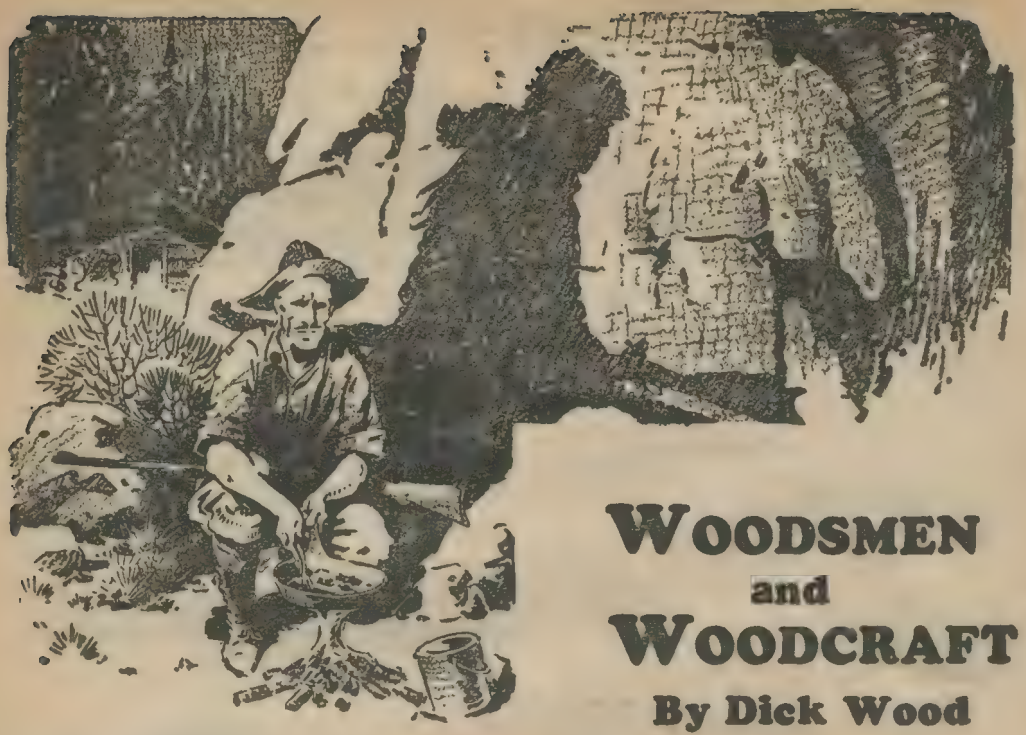
He couldn't quite savvy it, even when the cabin door burst open and Joan Shanley ran to support him. It wasn't until she dragged him inside and he heard Carl Shanley's voice that he began to understand.

The oldster was in his wheelchair, a smoking gun in his fist. "Thought I'd bit off more'n I could chew when I heard them varmints skulking around the yard and opened up on 'em," he explained. "And now they're all dead—every man of 'em!"

Little Louie, again in the bunk, listened. He was strangely contented in spite of his aching wounds. That feeling of content was still warming him when Joan returned from Piney Buttes, hours later, with the doc.

For Little Louie had found the trail to yesterday, the trail that would give him his chance to square things with the Shanleys. There was gold at trail's end—and something greater, too. . . . A thing called friendship.

Somehow, Little Louie knew that no bullet could ever steal that treasure from him. . . .



WOODSMEN and WOODCRAFT

By Dick Wood

The brawny men in buckskin who first fought for our unknown Western frontier, didn't win their struggle by flaming guns alone. Bill Hamilton, apt pupil of the great trapper, Bill Williams, learned that parleying with hostile Indians often brought rich returns in pelts. And if trading failed, there was always recourse to a more authoritative voice—that of famous Sam Colt's equalizer!

BILL HAMILTON'S career as a mountain man and Indian fighter started in the Spring of 1842. Reared on a farm near St. Louis in comfortable circumstances for those times, Bill had his own saddle horse and rifle almost before he could talk.

At the age of twenty, Bill's health had become endangered by chills and fevers. A change of climate was needed. St. Louis at that time was the metropolis of the frontier, the headquarters of fur trading companies, and an outfitting point for trappers and hunters. Like most boys, Bill had always been intrigued with the glamour and adventure suggested by the picturesque buckskin-clad mountain-men, who occasionally stopped at the old Planter's Hotel. After some persuasion, his father bought a third interest in a stock of trade goods, and turned him loose under the tutelage of Bill Williams, one of the best known Indian traders.

Williams' party of eight men started for Independence in a wagon caravan early in March of 1842. Here the wagons were sold or traded, and the goods transferred to pack horses. Bill Hamilton had left home wearing civilized clothes, but was hoorawed so much in this border town that he went to a store and traded his garments for two suits of buckskin and two pairs of moccasins.

Five days out, having reached Salt Creek, Bill had his first contact with hostile Indians.

Experienced mountain-men never permitted themselves to be surprised by Indians, for those who did generally had their hair lifted. Williams' party saw a herd of bison coming toward them and suspected they were being chased by In-

dians. They just had time to barricade themselves behind a breast-work made of their packs when about thirty Kiowas in war paint approached and demanded pay for trespassing on their territory.

Williams, the leader, was experienced in dealing with Indians, and a parley in sign language followed. Williams knew there was no chief in the party, which was led by a young brave with two feathers stuck in his scalp-lock, and the trader told the Indians the territory belonged to the Pawnees. He'd give them some tobacco, and if they were not satisfied with that, his men were ready to dish out hot bullets. Reluctantly, the Indians took the gift and left with surly looks on their faces. Thus Bill Hamilton had had his first lesson in sign talk and how to deal with hostile Indians, as demonstrated by a master diplomat of the plains.

Williams' party camped on North Platte River near Cherry Creek, in the Cheyenne country, and the camp was kept well supplied with buffalo and antelope meat. Soon three young Indian scouts rode into camp. They were welcomed by the traders, as the Cheyennes were generally well supplied with fine furs, robes and other commodities of the plains. The scouts were invited to eat so that Williams might learn what the Indians most needed.

A gift of tobacco was sent to their chief and their arrival at the Indian village announced for the next day. Then the traders set up a wall tent for a store house, some squaws were given buffalo tongue, choice cuts of meat, coffee, hardtack and molasses. The latter was especially prized by the Indians. The makings of the feast were given out with a free hand to make a favorable impression on the Indians. If given niggardly, the Indians would have decided that the traders would be stingy with their goods, and would retain their best furs until more liberal traders came along.

AFTER the feast and a smoke with the principal chiefs in White Antelope's lodge, the traders got down to business. Blankets were spread and piles of powder, half-ounce balls, flints, beads, paint, blue and scarlet cloths, calico and knives were laid out to entice the Indians to trade.

One of the rules of a good trader, and one that Williams always adhered to, was to pay only one price for a robe or fur. If one Indian had been paid more for a certain fur than another, the news would soon have been spread around the village and the trade demoralized.

The trading lasted for several days. During this time Bill Hamilton became very friendly with Swift Runner, son of a chief. As the Cheyennes were planning a buffalo hunt, they invited Bill to go along. Consulting Williams for his approval, the trader not only gave his consent, but offered to loan Bill his trained buffalo horse. Buffalo were invariably shot at close range, and only a trained hunting horse would gallop close alongside a buffalo, and dodge quickly in case of a charge from a wounded bull.

About fifty Indians and twenty squaws comprised the hunting party. The squaws led pack horses and went along to do the heavy work of dressing the kills, which was beneath the dignity of the bucks Within ten miles of the village a herd of bison were sighted.

The Indians now stripped to breechclouts, and divided into two parties with the idea of surrounding a detachment of the herd. They advanced as cautiously as possible and got within a quarter mile before the herd took alarm. Buffalo are fast runners when alarmed, and only fast horses can overtake them.

The hunting was exciting to Bill, who was able to keep up with the leaders. The one who made the first kill would be the hero of the village for days and gain the smiles of the most lovely maidens, so the

rivalry for the first buffalo was keen. Swift Runner had the fastest horse and brought down the first buffalo, to the chagrin of many braves, but young Hamilton was a close second when he dropped a fat cow, even though the bullet was placed too far back of the shoulders.

A herd of stampeding buffalo raises a cloud of dust which obscures prairiedog holes, knolls, buffalo skulls and similar hazards to a racing horse, consequently many Indians were thrown and not infrequently a pony's leg was broken. Soon, however, an area of three quarters of a mile of prairie was dotted with buffalo carcasses. Bill brought down four himself, and was praised by the Indians. The butchering lasted two hours, then each pack horse was loaded with three hundred pounds of meat and the hunting party returned to the village at sundown.

UNLIKE the hunter of today, who will carry along his lunch or at least a few chocolate bars to munch on, these early hunters left camp by daylight and never ate until they returned at nightfall. After a strenuous day, the hunters were wolfishly hungry, as Hamilton expressed it in his memoirs.

The surplus meat was made up into pemmican by the squaws. This was done by cutting the meat into thin strips and letting it thoroughly dry in the sunshine. The marrow of the bones and the best parts of the fat were simmered in a kettle over a slow fire. Usually berries were mixed with this fat. The dried meat was then pounded into a pulp on a flat stone and mixed with the fat into sausagelike cakes, then further dried until the pemmican became a highly concentrated and nutritious substance that would keep indefinitely. Hamilton is authority for the statement that one pound of pemmican equals five pounds of fresh meat.

Other delicacies of the plains were dried buffalo tongues and "depuyer" *(depouille)* a fat substance that lies along the back-bone of the buffalo, about as thick as a man's hand, extending from the shoulder blade to the last rib. One will weigh five to eleven pounds, according to size and condition of the animal. This substance, according to Hamilton, was taken off and dipped into hot grease for a minute, then hung up in the lodge to dry and smoke for twelve hours. It was used as a substitute for bread and was greatly relished by both Indians and white trappers.

When going on the war-path, the Indians took only dried meat and depuyer and lived on it for months. The white traders allowed as much as a dollar a pound for depuyer in trade.

Williams had traded the Cheyennes out of most of their furs and his party now headed for the South Platte River, where they expected to dispose of their furs to fur buyers returning to Green River from St. Louis. Reaching the river, they were met by some Sioux, who invited them to their village to trade.

Next morning at daylight a party of Pawnees—sworn enemies of the Sioux—ran off about a hundred head of their horses, which included some belonging to the whites.

A party of fifty young braves started out to recover the horses. The veteran trader, Williams, wanted to go, but Hamilton told him he was too old for such a strenuous trip, so Bill and a man named Noble took up the trail.

The Pawnees were followed for about ten miles before they were sighted and the number ascertained. The Sioux now stripped themselves to leggings and breech-clouts and mounted their war horses, which had thus far been led. Hamilton was mounted on the fast pony that had been presented to him by Swift Runner of the Cheyennes.

It is interesting to note that saddles

were not used, but instead a pad, made by filling two buckskin sacks with antelope hair, was thrown over the back of each horse. These pads were sewed together to fit snugly on each side of the pony's back-bone, and were held in place by a cinch strap. Stirrups were fastened to each side. Hamilton credits a padded horse with being able to travel twenty miles farther a day than when under a saddle.

As soon as the twelve Pawnees discovered they were being followed, they made a dash for a cottonwood grove. The Sioux leader, Young Thunder, gave a war-whoop and the race was on. Two of the Pawnees were overtaken, killed and scalped, the other ten reaching the safety of the woods. The Sioux were reluctant to approach enemies under cover, but noting a bunch of ponies straying toward the woods, Hamilton and Noble raced to circle them, drawing the fire of the sheltered Pawnees. The ponies were saved, but when they returned to camp, the trappers were reprimanded as being reckless by their captain, Williams. Hamilton says that the Pawnees showed poor judgment in timing their theft of the horses so close to daylight. Yet usually that tribe was credited as being clever thieves, so much so they were called "Wolf Indians" by the others.

WILLIAMS and his party moved down to another Sioux village and secured their best furs. Soon afterwards an old trader, Vasques, entered the country from "The States," with a wagon load of goods drawn by an ox team. Vasques was surly and plainly in ill humor because Williams had beaten him to the rich Sioux trade, but from necessity he made a deal with Williams, giving $750 cash and some Indian goods for his collection.

Williams next reached a village of the Arapahoes and in half a day of trading had secured a hundred fine robes and a quantity of furs. Then he packed up hastily to reach the Independence Rock crossing of Sweetwater River in time to intercept a wagon outfit that would buy the furs.

They were camped on the Sweetwater when a party of twenty-three Crow Indians approached within fifty yards and began making exorbitant and insulting demands. Just as the trappers were steaming up for a fight, Williams succeeded in pacifying the Indians and getting them to leave with a gift of tobacco.

Before reaching Green River, site of many a hunters' and traders' rendezvous, a man named Pomeroy approached with a pack of Indians goods. Williams shrewdly convinced him that he would find the Indian villages "dry-cleaned" of their robes and furs, and so made a trade to his own decided advantage.

Hamilton had observed Williams' trading tactics closely. Therefore, he reminded the old trader that the Indians would be dressing recent catches for several weeks, whereas Pomeroy had been led to believe that the Indians were leaving on a buffalo hunt. Williams excused his action as business diplomacy. Truly, the fur business has always been a skin-game, and so it remains to this day. The Indian fur-hunter and the white trapper get skinned out of their catches by the trader—who in turn is often skinned by another trader. The skinning goes on to the ultimate consumer, who always pays the long price.

The trappers' next jaunt was in the direction of Little Wind River in the Blackfoot country. This was the hunting ground of three tribes of the hostile Blackfoot nation, as well as that of the Crows, who never missed an opportunity to steal or prey on a small band of trappers. In spite of the hazards, the hunting grounds of these tribes afforded such excellent trapping for beaver, otter and other fine furs, that traders could not

resist taking a long chance to get rich.

Before camp was established, one of the men picked up a moccasin on the trail, which indicated a band of Blackfeet were on the war-path, as they then invariably traveled afoot. Williams was shrewd enough to select a sheltered camp-site, expecting an Indian attack.

It was well that he did, as they were attacked at four o'clock in the morning. But the trappers were not caught asleep for they invariably kept out guards, who were wise to the owl and wolf-calls which indicated the approaching Indians.

The Indians were soon repulsed, leaving three dead on the field. These were promptly scalped by two of the trappers. All Indians dreaded going to the Happy Hunting Grounds without their scalps, hence they often risked their lives to retrieve the carcasses of slain companions.

Williams, when once aroused, was known as one of the hardest Indian fighters on the plains. So, after the trappers had prepared and eaten a good breakfast, they took up the Indians' trail, angry because five of their ponies had been wounded.

The Indians were afoot, and having two wounded to help along, were traveling slowly. The trappers overtook them six miles from their camp and succeeded in cornering the redskins on a small prairie. Six of the eleven Indians were dropped on the first charge, five escaping to a grove of willows and aspens.

These were surrounded, and after some manouvering, were killed to the last warrior. They were scalped and their plunder taken, which, as was later learned, had been stolen from a small party of trappers. Friendly Indians a few days later identified the scalps as having belonged to Blackfeet.

SOON after this skirmish, Williams' party came in contact with a band of friendly Shoshones under the chief, Washakie, and a lively trade ensued. Later, a hunting party brought in three trappers, who told of having been attacked and two of their number killed by a band of Blackfeet. When shown the rifles which Williams' party had taken in their recent fight, the weapons were identified by the trappers as their own, and returned to them. The trappers had been in rich territory for they arrived with six eighty-pound packs of beaver, worth nine dollars a pound, or a total of $4320. The furs undoubtedly had been cached, and so were not found by the thieving Blackfeet.

At a council held between the trappers and the Shoshone chiefs, it was decided the next few weeks would be spent in hunting down hostile bands of Indians. The Shoshones wanted scalps and the glory of being feared by their enemies; the trappers wanted to trap without molestation, and this could only be done by teaching the raiding Indians a lesson. Three bands of twenty-five Shoshones and whites went out in different directions. All encountered hostile Indians, and returned victorious.

In the Spring of 1843 a trapper named Duranger, who had come from the Walla Walla country, reached the rendezvous and reported that the streams of the Blue Mountains were alive with beaver. About this time, a party of ten men arrived from St. Louis, and Williams returned from Santa Fe, where he had gone to trade. Bill Hamilton had remained in the mountains, having become enamoured with the wild and care-free life.

The forty-three trappers formed a company and started on a two-year expedition into the Northwest, which would take them into the country of the Bannocks, Modocs, Walla-Wallas, Umatillas and the "Red-Coats," as Hudson's Bay Company men were called by the plains Indians.

Their course led into Blackfeet coun-

try, which was being trapped by companies of Hudson's Bay men. Then they turned west, following the Boise River trail, and soon reached good trapping. With pack-horses loaded with beaver, they were discovered by a Bannock chief and his party, who demanded indemnity in no uncertain terms.

The chief was told to go plumb to hell by the haughty trappers, who swiftly looked about for a strong position to camp, knowing a fight was inevitable.

The trappers had only time to dig rifle pits and fortify their position before three hundred painted warriors assembled.

Besides rifles and Colt's pistols, the trappers had seven double-barrel shotguns, loaded with slugs, and almost every man of them was an experienced Indian fighter. As events later proved, one mountain-man was the equal of three or four Indians.

AFTER a parley had proved futile, the redskins charged from all sides. The trappers held their fire until the Indians approached within fifty yards, when every shot would count. At the first volley numerous Indians and ponies dropped, while the bows and arrows and Hudson's Bay trade muskets of the Indians did little harm.

After emptying their rifles, the trappers grabbed shotguns or pistols and poured another volley of hot lead into the milling redskins. The survivors lost no time in retreating to shelter.

Elated with their success, about thirty trappers mounted horses and gave chase, returning with a booty of sixty ponies and many scalps and muskets. Only one trapper was killed, but several were wounded. For years after this the Bannocks steered clear of the trappers.

Four *travois* were constructed by the trappers for hauling their wounded. The travois was the primitive cart of the American Indians. It was made by lashing a pole to each side of a pony—each pole the same length and size—and extending far enough back of the pony to drag the ground. Cross sticks were then lashed onto the poles behind the pony, to form a cradle for hauling duffle, a papoose or a wounded man, as the case might be. Thus part of the weight of the load rested on the ground, and a pony could carry a heavier load on a *travois* than on its back, while it was possible for a wounded man to lie full length in that sort of hammock between the two poles.

The trappers reached the Umatilla River in one day's travel. Here they were met by a chief of the Umatillas, who was friendly with trappers and hostile to Bannocks. The guide, Duranger, who was able to converse in the Chinook tongue, told the chief about the fight with the Bannocks, and showed the scalps and other plunder.

The chief and his braves, impressed, at once sent a runner to summon the entire village to hear the recital. The Umatillas were greatly elated to hear of the trimming their enemies had received, and to show their appreciation, they kept the trappers' camp well supplied with fresh venison and dried salmon.

These Indians speared their salmon at the foot of falls, using spears made of light pine, from seven to nine feet long and about an inch and one-half in diameter at the handle end, tapering toward the spike end. The spike or gig was detachable from the pole, and held by a cord which extended to the Indian's wrist. As soon as a fish was struck, the shaft was withdrawn, leaving the spike in its body. The fish was retrieved by the cord. The fish were split along the back and spread on stone to dry for future use.

Further adventures of Bill Hamilton and the Rocky Mountain trappers will be concluded next month.

DRY KANGES

By Philip Ketchum

Bullets whistled past Hollister's ears . . . as he dug in the spurs. . . .

Bill Hollister, Coin-branded fugitive, returned to the tragic, drought-stricken cow-country which had exiled him. . . . For he had sworn to wipe out the deadly-burning embers of range-war with blasting guns—or quench them forever in his own life's blood!

CHAPTER ONE

Killer's Return

WHEN first he caught sight of the snow-crusted top of Old Baldy, Hollister was aware of a quickening of his blood. And the next noon, when he came to Dry Creek, a strange nostalgia swept over him. Staring out across the broad plains sweeping up toward the mountains, his half forgotten memories brought a faint smile to his lips.

Suddenly he realized why it was that

MAKE GUNMEN

Thrilling cattleman novelette

he had never been able to settle down in any of the many places he had been during the past ten years. Always, in the back of his mind, there must have been the memory of the Buckhorn Valley, and the knowledge that someday he would return.

Riding slowly, to the left he could see the cleft in the mountains which marked the entrance to Roaring Water canyon where he and his brother Red had often gone hunting. To the right was Indian Mound. Straight ahead were the bluffs and in a hollow in front of them, not yet visible, he would find the sprawling little town of Twisted Butte.

The day was hot. A dry, burning wind swept out of the south kicking up before

him little whirlwinds of dust. Hollister frowned, suddenly conscious for the first time of how dry and burned out the valley seemed. The grass was stunted and short and crisp; not at all as he remembered it. Ten years before this had been a cattleman's paradise at this time of the year. Now it looked almost like the desert.

Nearing the windmill ahead, he saw fifty head of cattle gathered about it. As he drew closer he heard their mournful lowing and saw that a square, barbed wire fence kept them away from the yellow, brackish water pumped by the mill into an iron tank.

Pulling up his horse, he studied the cattle. They were scrawny and thin, bleary eyed. All bore the Frying Pan brand, and suddenly to Hollister's mind came the memory of Joe Patton, owner of the Frying Pan. His lips tightened as he thought of the last time he had seen Patton, and as he remembered what Patton had said.

Near him one of the steers, pushed by the milling of the others, stumbled and sprawled to the ground.

Hollister eyed it for a moment, then studied the windmill. Whose windmill it was, he didn't know. But one thing he did know. The cattle gathered around it needed water. In another hour, more of them would be down. In another day. . . .

Reaching into his saddle bag he found a pair of wire clippers. He rode forward to the fence, bent over and clipped the wires, then backed away. The cattle surged forward.

For a while, Hollister watched them, a serious expression on his lean, tanned face. Then shrugging his shoulders he rode on toward Twisted Butte.

FROM a point on the top of a hill, half a mile distant, Hollister stared down at the town. So far as he could see, it had not changed at all in the ten years since he had left it. If anything, the place looked smaller, the buildings more dingy. There was Ellsworth's Emporium, flanked by the Double Eagle Saloon and the Mountainview Hotel, Garvey's stable and corral, the old stage office and the feed store

A score of long forgotten names marched through his mind, and for a moment he was aware of a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He wondered how many of the old timers would still be around the town, how many of them would remember him, recognize him. And he wondered what they would think of his return.

The years he had been gone had changed him, he knew. Their mark was on his face, in the wrinkles around his mouth and eyes.

Hard, restless years they had been, years of ceaseless wanderings. Black years which had put steel into his soul, which had encased his emotions in iron bands.

Thinking back over the trail he had come his hands slid unconsciously to the two guns holstered at his sides and a harsh laugh broke from his throat. At times in the past, he had come close, very close, to living up to the predictions made by Joe Patton on the night he had left.

Riding on, Hollister passed a scattering of houses at the outskirts of the town, came to the main street and turned down it, pulled up in front of the livery stable. An old man, tilted back in a chair near the door, pushed himself erect and slouched forward.

Hollister swung to the ground, gave instructions as to the care of his horse.

The old man eyed him curiously, spat tobacco juice at a fly, and said, "Dry as this where yuh come from, mister?"

Hollister grunted. "It's dry everywhere, this year."

"Third year fer us," stated the old man. "Range is all shot to hell. Been here before, ain't yuh?"

Hollister made no answer. He swung

around, trudged up the dusty street, his eyes unconsciously marking every detail of the place. It hadn't changed at all, he decided. The same old weather-beaten sign marked the Case-Ace saloon and Miller's store. The porch of Ellsworth's Emporium still sagged wearily. The two-story Mountainview hotel looked as forlorn as ever.

There were no people on the street.

HOLLISTER came to the Double Eagle Saloon, pushed open the door and stepped inside. Dozing in a chair in the back of the room was a big, heavy-set man with reddish whiskers. Two other men were playing cribbage at a table to one side. There were no others in the bar.

The big man got up as Hollister entered, and moved around the bar. "Howdy, stranger," he greeted in a flat, disinterested voice.

Hollister didn't recognize the men. He said, "Howdy," and ordered his drink.

The man served him, poured a drink for himself and cursed the weather. The big man was sweating. His collar was limp and his shirt was dirty.

After a brief silence he said, gruffly, "What the hell ever brought you to a country like this?"

"No rain?" Hollister asked.

"No rain, an' last year no snow. Just as bad the year before. Roarin' River's dry; half the wells gone."

"How about the cattle?"

"Dyin', what there is left of 'em."

"I saw a well east of here," Hollister commented.

The bartender nodded. "Red Hollister's. He's better off than some of the others."

Two more men entered the saloon and the big man turned away to wait on them. Hollister finished his drink, crossed over to a chair and sat down. He felt strangely excited at the thought of being back in Twisted Butte, and for a moment his thoughts turned forward to his brother.

Red was three years older than he. Hollister recalled him as a very quiet, grave individual given to sudden flashes of temper. He wondered how much Red had changed, and what responsibility had done for him.

Sounds drifted into the saloon from out in the street. Hollister heard vague, muffled calls, and the creaking of saddle-leather. A band of men, he judged, had ridden into town, and he felt a sudden curiosity to see who they were. Then suddenly the door opened and a man stuck in his head.

"It's happened," the man announced tensely. "Patton cut the fence out at Red's well, east of here."

Hollister sensed a sudden stiffening in the attitudes of the men in the room. Someone muttered, "At last!" And then someone else said, "Patton's here in town. He's in the Emporium."

The men in the room moved toward the door, several of them fingering their guns. Hollister stood up, frowning.

These men expected trouble and he thought that he knew, though he couldn't understand, the reason for the trouble. That well east of town was Red's. The cattle around it had been Patton's. The fence had been cut and Patton's cattle admitted to water. So much was clear. The part he couldn't understand was why such an occurrence should cause trouble. He didn't recall his brother as a man who would refuse aid to a neighbor.

Moving to the door, Hollister pushed his way outside. Half a dozen horses were tied to the hitch rail in front of Ellsworth's Emporium, and on the porch stood a group of men talking in low, excited voices.

From the buildings across the street, people were staring toward the Emporium with grave, serious faces. Suddenly, then, the door of the Emporium opened and a short, undersized man with stooped shoul-

ders and with a leathery, wrinkled face, came out on the porch. There was a girl at his side. A tall, slender girl with dark hair and dark eyes.

Hollister heard her say, "I'll get the wagon, Dad, if you—" Her voice broke off abruptly.

She had seen, then, for the first time, Hollister was sure, the group of men standing at the far edge of the porch.

The man at her side was looking at them, too. He nodded and made some answer. The girl started away, then hesitated.

HOLLISTER moved out into the street, swung around and came up on the far side of the horses. He was conscious of sharp, stabbing looks from several of the men on the porch. He was a stranger to them, an unknown quantity. By the close attention they gave him he could measure the seriousness of the situation.

One of the men in the group, a dark, heavy-set fellow with a two day growth of beard on his jowls, frowned at him and then looked over toward the man who had just come through the door.

He said, bluntly, "Patton, we've just come in from the east."

The little man frowned, seemed puzzled. He said to the girl, "Run along, Myra. I'll see you later." But the girl didn't move.

Hollister glanced at the Circle H brand on the horses near him. Those men there on the porch, then, must be his brother's riders. But his brother wasn't with them, and he didn't recognize any of them as men he had known ten years before.

The whiskered man was scowling. He wiped a hand across his face and said again, "We jist came in from the east."

Patton shrugged. "Well, what of it?" He sounded impatient.

"Jist this," answered the whiskered man. "The fence we put around the water hole's been cut for Fryin' Pan stock. I told you if—"

Hollister took a step forward. "Just a minute," he said sharply

The whiskered man swung around to face him. Patton looked at him, and the girl looked at him. The others on the porch turned his way.

"I cut that fence," he announced.

There was a brief period of absolute silence, then the whiskered man sucked in his breath and rapped out: "Who in the hell are you?"

Hollister shrugged. He decided, suddenly, that he didn't like that whiskered individual. Backed by other men who looked as hard as he, the man with the whiskers had seemed to be deliberately trying to force Patton into a fight. Hollister didn't like that, either. And he didn't like the very obvious implication that his brother was going around fencing in the only available water in the valley.

"Well?" demanded the man.

Hollister stared at him. He said, slowly, "Mister, when I came past that windmill I saw a bunch of thirsty cattle. I fixed it so they could drink. If you don't like it, I'm sorry, but under the same circumstances, I'd cut the fence again tomorrow."

The whiskered man's shoulders hunched forward. He ripped out an oath, moistened his lips. Hollister knew that in another minute the man would be going for his gun, and the thought flashed across his mind that his reappearance in Buckhorn Valley was entirely in keeping with what a good many of the people here would have expected of him. Just as his departure, his return was to be heralded with blazing guns and sudden death.

OUT of the corner of his eyes, Hollister saw the girl at Patton's side clasp a hand over her mouth, as Patton took a

step forward. The whiskered man's arms jerked downward, yanked up his guns. Then Hollister drew and fired.

The movement was smooth and coordinated, seemed unhurried and wholly without effort, yet later there wasn't a man there who could remember just how Hollister's draw had been made. At one moment, Hollister had been standing facing the men on the porch, his thumbs hooked in his belt. In the next moment he had changed not at all, excepting that each hand held a gun, and that from the barrel of one trailed a bit of smoke.

Jerked half around by the force of the slug, the whiskered man lost his balance, dropped his guns and sprawled out on the porch. A hoarse cry of pain tore from his throat. One of his legs started twitching spasmodically.

Hollister didn't look at him. He was staring at the other men on the porch. Two had started to reach for their weapons, but had frozen motionless. Staring at them, Hollister said, "That's right, just leave your guns alone."

Men came running from across the street. Someone shouted, "What's goin' on here? What happened?"

There was a sound of authority to the voice. Hollister could see the tension running out of the group on the porch. He holstered his guns, turned half around.

One of the men hurrying forward was a short, heavy, bald-headed fellow with a star on his vest—Sheriff Mayhew! The name cut across Hollister's consciousness with the swiftness of thought. Then his eyes settled on one of the men back of Mayhew, a tall, lanky individual with a shock of red hair.

Mayhew pulled up, stared at him frowning. The man with the red hair, blinked, stopped suddenly. His mouth fell open. For an instant he looked at Hollister with a dazed, blank expression. Then a mantle of color flooded his face and he said sharply, "Bill, what are you doin' here?"

Hollister grinned. "Seems like I've been shootin' up one of your men, Red," he answered quietly.

More people were coming up, now. Someone was bending over the man on the porch. Here and there Hollister saw faces which seemed familiar, but he didn't try, just then, to tag those faces with names. He kept his eyes on his brother.

Red drew a deep breath, and said bluntly, "I should have thought that you would have the decency to stay away from here."

Hollister made no reply. All about him, it seemed, he could hear men whispering his name, and over his face, now, there came a tense and strained look. Then suddenly he heard it, heard the words he knew he should hear.

"Bill Hollister?" someone behind him was saying. "Why he's the fellow who got drunk an' killed his father, out in back of the Case-Ace saloon. About ten years ago!"

CHAPTER TWO

Guns in the Night

HOW vividly the memory of that night came back to him! In the years which had passed since then, he had relived that moment thousands of times. Over lonely campfires, in the midst of babbling crowds, nowhere in all his wanderings had he ever been able to escape it, and long ago he had realized that that memory was something which would live with him, always.

Now, in a few brief moments every stark detail of that night passed across his mind.

He had been wild, headstrong, given to quick angers in those days. And on one stormy night as he had been seated at a poker game in the Case-Ace, Tex Dowling had brought word that Gil Evans had just come to town, and that Evans was looking for him.

There had been bad blood between them over some trivial incident but his pride could not ignore Evans' challenge. He had left the Case-Ace, had walked out into the street to meet Evans. From one end to the other he had prowled, and then he had seen a shadow slipping around behind the saloon.

Every step he had taken from then on was engraven in his mind. He recalled, now, the first cold drops of rain and the rumbling thunder; his body pressed against the wall of the saloon; a faint, distant flash of lightning. And he could see again, in his mind's eye, the shadowy figure disclosed to him by that flash of light. The figure was standing not ten paces from where he was crouched against the saloon.

His shout, a sudden rumbling of thunder, the crashing explosion of guns and a man's hoarse cry, had seemed then to come all in the same instant. More lightning followed, lightning which this time showed him a figure staggering backward, sprawling to the earth. For another moment he had waited there, his gun still ready. Then moving forward, he had come to the figure on the ground and had bent over it.

Even now, as Hollister recalled that moment, he could feel an icy shudder running over his body and the muscles of his throat tightened until he could hardly breathe. For the next flash of lightning had shown him that the man whom he had killed was not Gil Evans, but his own father.

There were explanations, of course; ways of rationalizing what had happened. He hadn't seen the man's face before he shot him, and Evans and his father were of about the same size. He'd had no idea that his father had been in town. He had been sure that the figure he had seen had been that of Gil Evans. But any way he figured it, there was one very apparent fact which he couldn't escape. With his own guns he had shot down his father!

A SHARP, blunt question called him back to the present. "Well, what's your explanation this time?" Sheriff Mayhew was asking

Hollister's eyes swept around the circle of faces. Nowhere did he see a friendly look. The thought came to him with some bitterness that to those men who knew him, he was still as the wild, reckless, headstrong youth who had shot at a man without being sure of his identity.

"I have no explanation," he said flatly.

Patton shoved his way forward. "Hawke drew on him," he offered. "It was an even break. Hawke jumped him about a fence he'd cut."

The sheriff grunted and some man from the porch said, "Hawke's not bad hurt. Smashed shoulder. Let's get him inside."

Men picked up the wounded rider and carried him into the Emporium. Hollister swung around, started back toward the Double Eagle Saloon.

"Bill!" called a voice.

He stopped and turned. A tall, thin man was walking toward him. The man's face was wrinkled and weather-beaten. His skin was like leather. He wore a drooping mustache.

"Tex," Hollister said as the man came up to him.

The man nodded, put out his hand. "Glad tuh see you, Bill. Heard about yuh, sometimes. Guess yuh've been around, huh? Always knew yuh'd come back sometime," he stated.

Hollister looked past Tex Dowling's shoulder. He saw that his brother was still looking at him, that Red's face was still flushed.

His lips tightened. He said, "See you later, Tex," and turning away, moved on past the Double Eagle to a restaurant. He sat down at a table in the back of the room

He ate his meal slowly and alone. Half a dozen men he had known ten years before came into the place, ate and departed. They all saw him but none of them spoke. There was an undeniable coldness, even hostility in their attitude.

As he finished his meal, Sheriff Mayhew came in, crossed over to his table and scowled down at him. "What are you doin' here, Bill?" he asked, bluntly.

Hollister shrugged. "Nothin', yet."

"Mean to stay?'

"Yes."

The sheriff's scowl deepened. He rubbed a hand over his bald head

"Why not?" Hollister asked.

The sheriff sat down. "Plan to claim yuhr half of the ranch?"

Hollister hadn't, but he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Maybe, Sheriff. I don't know yet."

The sheriff sighed and a worried expression came into his eyes. He said, slowly, "We've had bad times, Bill. Water's dried up, grass burned out. Men's tempers are gettin' short. Your brother has the only three wells that haven't gone dry. He's fenced 'em fer his own stock."

Well?"

"Fer what stock he's got left, that's more water than he needs. But he's fenced 'em, jist the same. Patton, Fortney, Webb, an' the other ranchers are up in arms about it. I've got enough trouble ahead without. . . ." The sheriff paused.

"Without havin' to worry about me, huh?"

"Yes."

Hollister got up. He could understand how the sheriff felt. It would have been bad enough had he returned under normal circumstances. But in view of present conditions, the situation was even worse. With men's feelings raw, with their emotions strained to the breaking point, he had suddenly popped into the picture. And in cutting the fence out at that well he had made himself an unwelcome ally of the other ranchers, against his own brother.

"Sorry, sheriff," he grunted. "Life's a funny proposition, isn't it."

TURNING away, he walked to the front counter, paid for his dinner and stepped outside. It was growing dark, but the hot wind of the afternoon was still blowing. There were only a few people visible on the street. The horses which had been in front of the Emporium were gone. There was a wagon there, now, and Ellsworth was carrying a box to it.

Moving forward, Hollister was passing the Emporium just as Joe Patton came out. Patton saw him and called his name. He stopped, waited while Patton came up.

Staring at him with a strange, tight expression on his face, Patton said sharply, "After this, Hollister, I'll cut my own fences. Understand?"

Hollister shrugged. "I understand," he said, flatly.

Across the street, two men had stopped and were staring over at him and Patton. Near the corner of the building a shadow moved, then slid out of sight. Hollister felt a vague uneasiness.

"All right, then. Just keep out of my affairs," Patton added.

Hollister moved on toward the corner of the building, one hand close to his gun.

"Bill," called a low voice from the shadows.

He stiffened, looked around at Patton, then looked across the street. Patton had turned back toward the door of the Emporium, but the two men across the street were still watching him.

"Bill," came the whisper again.

He turned, moved toward the shadowy passage between the Emporium and the hotel. He made out a slender figure waiting for him in the darkness.

He said, hesitantly, "Myra?"

The girl's head nodded, then she said, "Bill, I promised your brother to give you a message before I left town. It's this: He wants to meet you tonight at the place where you caught the cub bears when you were sixteen. He said that you would remember."

A sharp excitement gripped Bill Hollister. "So Red said that!" he whispered. He remembered the place. It was several miles up Roaring River Canyon. But why, he wondered, should Red want to meet him there? Why, after the way he had acted, should Red want to meet him at all?"

Myra Patton leaned forward. She said, swiftly, "Bill, your brother's in trouble. I don't know what it is but I know—I know that he didn't want to fence in his wells. My father knows it, too. I—I hope—'

Staring beyond the girl and on down the passageway, Hollister thought that he caught sight of a slinking shadow. He swung around and stared back across the street. The two men who had been watching him were coming forward.

Grasping the girl's arm, he said, "Thanks, Myra." And then almost roughly he pushed her forward and away from him, toward the hotel.

THE two men crossing the street stared at the girl as they came closer. Then, in front of Hollister, they paused.

One of them said grimly, "The decent folks in the valley don't like the notion of havin' a murderer move back here. Yuh git the point, don't yuh?"

Hollister moistened his lips, thinking of that slinking shadow he had noticed down the alley. It would be quite simple, he realized, for these two men to engage him in conversation while some other person slipped up the passage way and shot him in the back. And Twisted Butte, he decided, wouldn't be very much concerned over such an incident.

He stepped forward swiftly, swung around and faced the passageway. "I get the idea," he grated. "Watch!"

Whipping up his guns, he blasted three quick shots into the shadows between the hotel and the Emporium. An orange flame streaked out at him. He fired twice more, placing one bullet to the left and one to the right of that flashing gun. A sharp cry sounded from the passageway, then came the thud of a falling body.

Men were appearing in building doorways, and were racing up the street. The two who had been facing him had backed away. They were breathing heavily, looking frightened.

Hollister laughed bitterly, feeling deep danger stirring in his veins. He saw Mayhew come bursting out of the restaurant and he suddenly decided that he had had enough of this town's dark suspicions and of the black unfriendly regard of its men.

There was a horse hitched to the rail in front of the hotel. He didn't know whose horse it was, didn't care. Stepping that way he loosened the reins, swung into the saddle.

"Hey there," Mayhew called. "Wait a minute."

Hollister swung the horse away from the hotel. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Myra Patton leaning against the hotel, one hand clutched to her breast. He thought that she called something to him but he couldn't be certain.

"Stop him," Mayhew yelled. "Stop him!"

Bullets screamed through the air, whistled past Hollister's ears. He sent a few shots back over their heads, then raked the horse with his spurs. In another minute the town of Twisted Butte had dropped behind him, and he was riding west toward the towering mountains and to an appointment which he couldn't understand.

CHAPTER THREE

Hot Lead for Water!

SEVERAL miles up Roaring river canyon, Hollister dismounted. He tied his horse in a clump of trees, moved on a little way and then stopped. It was darker here in the canyon than outside on the plains. The shadows were thick, heavy.

Facing the left wall of the canyon he stared at it uncertainly. It was over that way at the foot of a towering cliff where he and Red had caught the bear cubs but he wondered, now, whether or not he could find the exact spot, or even come close to it. That bear hunting expedition had been a long time ago.

He picked his way forward, moving carefully, soundlessly. And suddenly he stopped. From the left had come a low whistle. He waited, and it came again. With a tightening excitement he recognized it as Red's old signal, a signal not employed since they had been boys.

He answered it, moved to the left. Someone came crashing through the underbrush which covered the canyon's floor, moved out into a clearing. And in the half light from the sky he could recognize his brother's face.

Red hurried forward, thrust out a hand and he grasped it. No other word was said just then; no other word was needed. By the clasp of his brother's hand he knew that no shadow stood between them.

Red stepped back, laughing a little uncertainly and said, "I wasn't sure that Myra would get you the message, or that you would remember this place."

Hollister grinned, pointed ahead. "It was right up there where I climbed the tree, remember? I poked them down with a stick. You got 'em."

Red looked around, bit his lips. "Yes, I remember."

His voice seemed a little shaky and Hollister didn't like the look on his face. He asked abruptly, "What's the matter, Red?"

Reaching into his pockets for the makings, Red built a cigarette. He stuck it between his lips, then passed the sack to Hollister. Hollister thumbed out a paper, spilled tobacco into it, rolled it into a cylinder. He struck a match, held a light to his brother's cigarette and then lit his own.

Red inhaled deeply. He said slowly, "Bill, the Circle H isn't mine any more. Or at least, whatever part of it was mine doesn't belong to me now. I—I lost it—gambling."

Hollister nodded. Red, he recalled, had always been a fool about cards. Games of chance seemed to hold a fascination for him which he couldn't escape. He discovered that he wasn't greatly surprised at what Red had said.

"Then it wasn't your idea to fence in those wells," he suggested.

"No, that wasn't my idea. And, before I tell you whose it was, let me ask you a question. Who was it, on the night father was killed, that told you Gil Evans was hunting for you?"

Hollister frowned. "Tex Dowling. Why?"

Red dropped his cigarette, stepped on it. "I thought so," he nodded. "But Gil Evans wasn't hunting for you that night, Bill. I saw him about five years ago. He left the valley, you remember, right after father was killed. Well, about five years ago he came back. He told me, then, that he didn't even know you were in town that night!"

HOLLISTER could feel his blood pounding against his head. He tried to figure out what this statement of Red's could mean, but the notion which came to him was so startling that he couldn't believe it possible.

"When I talked to Evans," Red con-

tinued, "I didn't think much about that statement of his, but lately—"

"But lately—what?" Hollister demanded.

"But lately," Red said slowly, "I've wondered if Dowling didn't deliberately lie to you. Perhaps after he saw you and sent you after Evans, he might have looked up father and sent him out back of the Case-Ace, guessing what might happen. Dowling said later, you know, that father had gone out to hunt you up and stop a possible fight."

Hollister was breathing heavily. If it was true that Gil Evans hadn't been hunting for him that night, then his crazy suggestion of Red's might also be true.

"Where is Evans?" he demanded.

"Dead." Red paused, then said slowly, "Dowling shot Evans the day after I had talked to him."

For a moment Hollister stared ahead at the shadowed wall of the cliff. That something like this might have happened had never occurred to him. The thought of it left him with a weak feeling in his knees.

Jerking around to face his brother, he said, suddenly, "It's Dowling, then, who owns the ranch."

Moving over to a rock, Hollister sat down. In view of what Red had told him, he decided, it was clearly possible that Tex Dowling had planned the death of his father.

HE TRIED to think back, tried to recall the relationship between Dowling and his father. But he could recall nothing which would indicate an antagonism between them. Evans, who might have verified Red's story, was dead. How else it might be verified, he couldn't figure out

"Red," he asked, "when did you lose your share of the Circle H to Dowling?"

"Within the last few months."

"But no one knows it?"

"No one knows it. Dowling said there wasn't any rush about the transfer of title."

That was clever of Dowling. Hollister decided. Through the fact of his ownership he could force a fencing of the wells, antagonize the ranchers towards Red. Then, when he felt the time was ripe, he could push through the transfer, open up the wells, and that way make himself solid with the valley.

All the criticism would fall on Red. And people would not be too inquisitive as to how Dowling had acquired the ranch. They'd be glad to see Red gone.

Standing up, Hollister said grimly, "Well, Red, I'm back now and half the Circle H is mine. I don't approve of fencin' wells when cattle need water. Suppose we go an' see Tex Dowling."

"He'll make trouble for you, Bill Most of the Circle H riders you knew are gone. He's replaced them with men he's picked. Though they think of me as the owner, they know Dowling's the boss."

Hollister laughed shortly. "Get your horse, Red?"

Red hesitated. He said bluntly, "Bill, I've been an awful fool. I didn't—"

Crossing over to him, Hollister dropped both hands on Red's shoulders. He said slowly, "Bill, there aren't many men who can be proud of everything they've done. It's given to all of us to play the fool, more or less. But that isn't what counts. The mistakes a man makes should never be counted against him. It's what he does about those mistakes which is important. Now go get your horse!"

A MILE beyond the mouth of Roaring River Canyon, Hollister pulled up and stared out across the Buckhorn Valley. Though it was well after midnight, he figured that they would arrive at the Circle H ranch house an hour or more before dawn. That was earlier than he

wanted to get there, and a sudden impulse came to him to take a step which would without question indicate just what part he meant to take in the picture. Later, he was to regret that impulse, but just then it seemed both logical and right.

"Red," he asked, "where are the other two fenced wells?"

"One," his brother answered, "is north and east, about ten miles from here. The other is due south. Twelve miles, maybe."

Hollister nodded. "Red, let's cut those fences. I'll take the one to the south. You take the other. We'll meet at Table Rock, west of the Circle H. How about it?"

A reckless laugh broke from Red's throat. "I'm on my way," he announced. "See you later, Bill. I've wanted to cut those fences for a month."

Hollister watched him ride away, then turning, headed south.

He reached the fenced well, and there, as at the other well near Twisted Butte, he found a herd of thin, thirsty cattle.

Cutting the wires, he backed away. And as the cattle drank deeply of the water a grim smile touched Hollister's lips. Thinking of what lay ahead, his hands moved automatically to his guns and rested on the butts for a while.

WITH the coming of the dawn, he reached Table Rock, a flat outcropping of rocks about two miles west of the Circle H ranch house. Red wasn't there.

Hollister dismounted, rolled a cigarette, and staring out across the country, watched for his brother, a curious feeling close to happiness possessing him.

During the ten long years which were passed he had always felt alone. Even with groups he had known well, that feeling of loneliness had persisted. But now, in spite of what had happened ten years before, he had a sense of belonging to this country, of being at home here. And thinking of Red, he felt suddenly very close to him.

A rider, streaking across the plains, pulled up at the distant ranch house and after a while Hollister could see smoke pouring from the chimney. Then someone came out of the house, moved over to the barn. Hollister watched the place coming to life, thinking of his boyhood, of Red, and of Myra Patton.

The three of them had been almost inseparable. Myra had been just like another boy. She had played their games, ridden with them, and once or twice gone hunting with them. Sometimes during the past ten years he had thought of her, wondered what had happened to her, and now he suddenly found himself trying to recall just how she had looked when he seen her in Twisted Butte. But the memory of her face evaded him. He could remember her only as a skinny, awkward girl with long, black braids, tied with red ribbons.

A hurried activity at the ranch house attracted his attention. Men came pouring out of the place, racing to the corral, and there saddling up.

He got to his feet, frowning, aware of a vague uneasiness. His eyes searched the surrounding country. There was no sign of Red, and Red should have reached here by this time.

The Circle H men mounted and rode away, heading for Twisted Butte. Hollister's frown deepened. He turned back to his horse, swung into the saddle and started forward. And as he headed for his old home his uneasiness increased, and an irritating restlessness bothered him.

Riding up into the yard, he dismounted and started for the door. It opened just as he reached the porch steps, and two men came out, followed by a third. At the sight of him they stiffened, spreading out a little.

Hollister's eyes unconsciously measured the men facing him. They were men he didn't know, but of a type he knew well. Hardened, bitter, shifty-eyed, he had seen

many just like them on other war-torn ranges or in camps back in the hills, safely hidden from the arms of the law.

"Where's Dowling?" Hollister asked.

None of the three men answered him.

"Where's Red?" he demanded

One of the men moistened his lips, then said gruffly, "You should know, Hollister. You shot him down, didn't yuh?"

A cold perspiration broke out all over Hollister's body. "Red—shot?" he gasped.

The man nodded. "Yeah, shot. The rest of the men rode in to join the posse. They didn't think yuh'd walk in on us like this, but since yuh have, we'll jist take yuh over. Unbuckle that gun-belt, Hollister, an reach fer the sky!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Gal for a Fighting Man

FOR perhaps half a minute, Bill Hollister didn't move. He stood facing that porch like a stricken man, every muscle paralyzed, his thoughts in chaotic confusion. During that time, any of the men on the porch might have walked up to him and taken his guns without the slightest danger. But the stiffness of his attitude must have fooled them. They stood on the porch, waiting, watching him closely.

"Unbuckle that gun-belt, Hollister," one of the men ordered again.

Bill Hollister sucked in a deep breath. He was aware of a sharp, blinding anger which swept over him, an anger which made him tremble. The notion came to him that it was his return which had precipitated this

Until he had showed up, Red had done as Dowling had ordered. Dowling had had no trouble, nothing to bother him. But now with another Hollister on the scene, Dowling was moving swiftly to gain undisputed command of the Circle H.

That Dowling was responsible for what had happened to Red, Hollister didn't question. It fitted in with all that Red had told him, and he knew that Red hadn't lied. Perhaps, he realized, he wouldn't be able to prove that Dowling was guilty, but so far as he was concerned, his own conviction was enough.

He eyed the men on the porch, shook his head. "No, I'll not unbuckle my guns. Turn around, all of you."

The three men didn't turn around. One of them shot a glance at the others.

He said in a high, sharp voice, "All right, then. You asked for it, you—" Then the man grabbed for his guns, jerked them up.

Hollister snaked out one of his .44's. He shot the man through the head, and turned the gun on the other two. He was as cool then as he had ever been in his life

Both of the other men had reached for their guns at the same time as their companion. Bullets roared toward Hollister. His horse screamed, started galloping away. Hollister fired in swift reply, yet with deadly deliberation. A second man went down, and then a third.

Hollister stared toward them, lowered his gun, broke it and reloaded it automatically. He climbed up the steps to the porch, his face set in strained lines. Two of the men were dead. The third, wounded in the shoulder, was mumbling something he couldn't understand.

Picking up the wounded man, Hollister carried him inside. He heated water, bathed the man's shoulder, pressing a bandage against the wound and tied it into place, while the wounded man cursed him bitterly.

Hollister returned to the kitchen. He poured a cup of warm coffee, drank it and ate some half-cold fried potatoes and bread

He had no illusions as to the problem which faced him now. The Buckhorn Valley, knowing him guilty of the death of

his father, could easily be persuaded that he had killed his brother, too.

Red had shown no friendliness toward him the day before in Twisted Butte. The notion that he had come back, had killed his brother, and had planned on taking over the Circle H wasn't beyond the credulance of men who had always thought him more than half an outlaw, anyhow. And Tex Dowling and his crew, riding with a posse in search of him, would do all they could to strengthen that belief.

HOLLISTER went back into the other room to question the wounded man, but he could learn nothing beyond the bare fact that someone had ridden out from Twisted Butte with the news of what had happened to Red. Where Red had been shot, or who had discovered his body, the man either didn't know or wouldn't tell.

Leaving the house, Hollister caught a fresh horse from the corral, borrowed a saddle from the barn, saddled up, mounted and turned east and north. After a few miles he caught sight of a windmill. This was the well, he decided, toward which Red had come. And sometime, either after reaching the well or before reaching it, Red must have bumped into trouble.

Hollister drew near the well. The fence surrounding it had been cut. Cattle still thronged around the iron tank but here and there a few of them were grazing on the dry, burned grass.

He studied the scene. The fact that some of the cattle were grazing meant that they had had their fill of water, probably drinking several times. Red, then, had reached this well without any trouble. It must have been on the return trip to Table Rock that he had been shot.

Swinging his horse around, Hollister started back toward Table Rock. He tried to pick out the tracks which might have been made by Red's horse, but there were many tracks near the well and the task was impossible. He gave it up, finally, on the brow of a little hill, several miles from the well. He didn't feel that he had much time. The posse from Twisted Butte would soon head out this way.

It was then that Hollister remembered Joe Patton's ranch house. Not five miles from the Circle H, it was almost in a direct line between Table Rock and the well. So he started for Patton's.

As he neared it he saw that there were several saddled horses tied to the corral fence. A conviction came to him that here he would discover what had happened to Red.

Riding up before the house, he dismounted, crossed to the door and knocked.

Joe Patton opened the door. He took one look at Hollister, back a step away, dropped a hand to his gun. Over his face had come a tight, bitter look.

"You?" he whispered. "You?"

Hollister nodded. "Where's Red?"

Myra suddenly appeared at Patton's side, grasped his arm. She was wearing a blue gingham dress. Her hair was caught in a bun on the back of her neck. She seemed very tall but not at all skinny or awkward.

"Dad," she cried. "Please don't. Let me talk to him."

"Get back in the other room, Myra," Patton said coldly.

The girl shook her head. She ran forward through the door, pulled it shut after her and leaned against it, staring up into Hollister's face.

"Red?" Hollister asked.

Myra's eyes looked straight into his. "You didn't do it, did you," she said quickly. "I can tell that by the way you look. I knew it all the time. I told them that, but they wouldn't listen to me."

Some of the tension went out of Hollister then. His shoulders slumped. "No, I didn't do it," he answered. "I've just heard about it. What happened?"

"My father heard a shot about an hour before dawn," Myra told him. "He went outside. He saw a saddled horse over that way." The girl pointed to the left.

"He heard someone riding off," Myra continued, "but the saddled horse didn't move. He walked over and found the body of a man. It was Red. He carried him inside and I went to Twisted Butte for a doctor.'

Hollister caught his breath. "Then—he isn't dead?"

"No, but the doctor doesn't give us much hope."

Hollister's hands were moist as he rubbed them together. He leaned forward and said grimly, "Myra, he's got to live! He's got to pull through. You tell that doctor. . . ."

HOLLISTER'S lips tightened. He had thought his brother dead, had been thinking only in terms of vengeance. But if Red lived he had a greater responsibility. Though he himself might never escape the shadow of his father's death, the good name of Red Hollister could be reestablished in the Buckhorn Valley, and once more boss the Circle H

"Red's unconscious," Myra stated. "Several times he's muttered your name. That's what made my father think it was you who—who shot him."

Hollister nodded. "Is he—?"

Myra grasped his arm, excitedly and pointed across the prairie. "They're coming!" she whispered. "You've got to ride, Bill. If Red should die, those men—"

"Red mustn't die!" Hollister interrupted grimly.

He turned away, hesitated, then turned back to the girl. "Remember the line shack up by Thorny Gulch? Is it still there?"

"Yes, but—"

"Listen Myra," he insisted, "Will you do something for me?"

"Yes. What, Bill?"

"Do you think you could get Tex Dowling to go to that line shack tomorrow afternoon? Do you think you could get him there alone?"

"You think Dowling—?"

"Can you do it, Myra?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, Bill."

Hollister straightened. He said, "Thanks, Myra. And look after Red—always!"

Then, turning again, he ran for his horse, vaulted into the saddle and rode west toward the mountains.

The posse altered its course, turning that way, too, but Hollister had something now toward which he could look forward. A chase didn't matter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Makes Its Gamble

LATE the next afternoon, Bill Hollister stood at the window of the Thorny Gulch line shack, staring out across the rolling prairie.

He was tired, haggard. His face was dirt-streaked and scratched. A blood-stained cloth was knotted around one leg.

Since that posse had sighted him he had had no opportunity for rest. Half a dozen times during the twenty-four hours just passed he had barely escaped capture. Winding through the hills he had led the posse this way, then, leaving his horse, he had taken to the underbrush, forcing his way through the cruelly lacerating cactus bushes.

Just how he had managed to escape was something that he would never know. But he had done it, and by a roundabout way, had reached the gulch which passed this old line cabin. Now he was waiting for Tex Dowling.

Two figures on horseback topped a distant hill, dropped out of sight and then reappeared again, closer to the cabin. A grim smile came to Hollister's lips. He

limped over to a box near the crude table in the room and sat down, fingering a dogeared pack of cards. Dowling was on his way here. Myra was bringing him.

Hollister examined his guns, then put them away. The sound of voices reached his ears and the creaking of saddle leather. The door was opened suddenly by the girl.

She took one look at Hollister, then turned and said, "He's here already, Tex."

A man's figure joined the girl at the door, and came on inside

Hollister stood up. "Nice of you to come, Tex," he said evenly. And as he spoke it seemed to him that a look of relief came into Tex Dowling's eyes, and that some of the stiffness went out of his body.

Dowling nodded. "Glad yuh sent fer me, Bill. Guess yuh want a horse, huh? An' maybe a little money."

Hollister shook his head. "I didn't kill Red."

"Maybe not," Dowling shrugged. "But the way the men feel, it'll be a necktie party if they catch yuh, I guess—" Dowling's voice broke off.

He stared down at Hollister's hands. There was a gun in each hand. Swiftly and without any warning at all, Hollister had drawn them.

Bill Hollister's voice was cold and sharp as he said: "Myra, unbuckle Dowling's gun-belt and throw it out the window."

Myra Patton hesitated, looking at Hollister. Then she reached in front of Dowling, unbuckled his belt and carried it over to the window.

Dowling's face was gray. He blinked his eyes, looked nervously around the room

Hollister laughed shortly. "Don't look for help, Dowling. There isn't any. You have only one chance to live—one thin chance."

Dowling moistened his lips. "What—what do you want?"

"I want the truth about a few things," Hollister snapped. "Red told me the other night that Gil Evans wasn't hunting for me the night I shot my father. You told me he was. I want the truth. And I want the truth about who shot Red. You shot him yourself, didn't you?"

Dowling caught his lips between his teeth, rubbed his hands together. Guilt was written in his face. Fear showed in his eyes.

HOLLISTER laughed again, lowered his guns. "A gambler's chance for the truth, Dowling," he offered. "Either that, or I'll take a chance that I'm right and shoot you right here in this room. I haven't much to lose either way."

"What do you mean?" Dowling gasped.

"Have you ever known me to lie?"

"No, but—"

Hollister nodded. "All right, Dowling," he cut in. "You tell me what I want to know and I'll throw one of these guns out of the window. Then I'll cut the cards with you for the other gun. High man to get it."

Dowling's eyes slid to the cards on the table, narrowed. He was breathing heavily.

"Well," Hollister snapped, "Is it high card and a chance, or shall I just shoot?"

"High card," Dowling whispered.

"Then speak your piece, Dowling."

Dowling looked up at him and there was a reckless glint in the man's eyes. In a high, unnatural voice, he said, "You guessed the truth, Hollister. I don't have to tell you. I shot Red."

"And my father? You sent him out back of the Case-Ace saloon that night?"

Dowling nodded.

Hollister turned around, walked over to the window, tossed one of his guns outside. The other he lay on the window's edge.

Myra grabbed his arms. "You're not going to do it!" she cried. "You can't!"

But Hollister pushed her away. "Get outside, Myra."

"No. I won't. You—"

"*Get outside!*"

Myra caught her breath, turned around and stumbled blindly toward the door. It slammed after her, and the two men were left alone in the cabin.

FROM where he stood near the window, Bill Hollister stared over at Dowling. Dowling had moved up to the table, was examining the cards. He handled them with the expert ease of a man long used to playing with them. Hollister watched him, and he saw suddenly how it might have happened that Red had lost the ranch.

Dowling was more than just a ranchhand. His manipulation of that old, worn, dog-eared pack of cards was as graceful as that of any professional gambler Bill Hollister had ever seen.

Hollister moved back to the table. "Ready?" he asked dryly.

Dowling glanced up at him, looked over toward the gun in the window, and nodded his head.

"High card for the gun. One cut."

Hollister laughed. "Stack 'em up."

Dowling shuffled, pushed the deck together. Again his breath was coming fast. "Go ahead," he whispered tensely.

Hollister reached for the cards. He cut about one-third deep into the pack but held his card close to the table without showing it.

"Cut, Dowling," he said softly.

Dowling reached out for the cards. His hand shook a little. He hesitated. Perspiration ran in little rivulets down his forehead

"Cut, Dowling," Hollister said again.

Dowling's hand closed on the deck. He drew it away, turned it over slowly. He had cut the queen of diamonds.

Hollister could see the look of relief which swept over the man and a cold, clammy feeling gripped him tightly.

"Turn your card, Hollister!" Dowling gasped hoarsely. "Turn your card!"

Hollister turned his hand, looked at the card he had cut. It was a king.

"My gun, Dowling," he whispered.

With a sharp, wild cry, Tex Dowling lunged against the table, swung a fist at Hollister's head, and then jerking around, dived across the room toward the window. Hollister evaded that blow aimed at his head, charged after him, then stopped suddenly as Dowling turned to face him, the gun in his hand, his fingers wrapped about the gun-butt, a cold, deadly smile in his eyes.

IN THAT moment, Bill Hollister tasted deeply the bitterness of defeat. Though he had bluffed Dowling into a confession, had beaten him in the greatest gamble of his life, still he had lost in the end.

In a moment, now, he knew that that gun would belch fire. He would feel, perhaps, a burning pain, and then after that everything would be over.

Dowling's lips were twisted. "Back up, Hollister," he ordered. "I've got a couple things to add to what I said a while back—a couple things yuh'd like tuh know. I want to see what your face looks like when I tell you. In the first place, I've got a few men spotted around outside. That girl didn't get away. You wouldn't have got away if you'd left here in place of me. When she came to tell me you wanted to see me, I figgered you might have gotten wise. So you see, you wasn't so clever, after all!"

Hollister shrugged. Then he thought of Myra and a cold fury swept over him. He took a step forward

"Bill Hollister, one more thing," Dowling barked. "I was out back of the Case-Ace the night your father was killed. You didn't shoot him. I shot him. I shot him from back of a pile of barrels over at one side. The thunder—"

Bill Hollister waited to hear no more. With a choking cry of rage he threw himself forward. Dowling's hand tightened on the gun, the hammer snapped back and fell against the firing pin. But no shot sounded. An expression of stunned surprise came to Dowling's face. He pulled the trigger again and then again but still the gun missed fire.

Hollister couldn't understand what had happened, but just then that wasn't important. His fist smashed into Dowling's face and his other hand, closing on the gun, tore it from the man's grasp. Then, still in the grip of his anger, he waded in, fists working like pistons, every blow carrying the weight of his body and smashing home merciless punishment.

Outside the cabin there were the sounds of men's voices, but he heard them only dimly. A blow rocked Dowling to the floor. He reached over, pulled him erect and knocked him down again. And then finally, throwing himself on the man's body, his fingers sought his throat.

Men came charging into the cabin, pulled him away from Dowling, though he fought to maintain his hold. And Sheriff Mayhew's voice said grimly, "What do yuh want to do, Bill. Choke him to death?"

Hollister stared at Mayhew and said thickly, "Yes, I do!"

The sheriff grunted. "Don't know as I blame yuh any, Bill."

And for the first time, then, it occurred to Hollister to wonder at Mayhew's presence here.

He stared around the room and saw other familiar faces. Joe Patton was present, and Fortney and Andrew Webb, two of the ranchers from up north.

"Guess maybe I better explain what happened," Mayhew suggested. "I knew all about your appointment out here. Myra Patton told me about it. She got us to come along. Some of us was a little doubtful, but when we got here hours ago an' found a bunch of Dowling's men hidin' around, we decided that Myra knew what she was talkin' about."

"Then you know—"

"I heard it all from outside the cabin, Bill. Everything that Dowling said."

"That gun in the window. It was loaded. I—"

"Myra got the gun while you an' Dowling were cuttin' the cards. She took the bullets out."

A couple of the men had bound Dowling and were carrying him outside. Others crowded around Bill Hollister. Some shook his hand. Without exception, all of them said that they were glad that he had come back to Buckhorn Valley, that they hoped he'd stay.

Patton came up last. "Red's better," he announced. "He'll pull through, Bill Come on. Ride back with me and Myra "

He walked to the door of the cabin. Over near the horses he caught sight of Myra and he started toward her.

Hollister's shoulders straightened. He felt, suddenly, like a different man. The nightmare which had followed him for ten years was wiped out. He was back home, and Red would get well. They would fight this drouth—together, and with the other ranchers here in the valley.

He walked over toward the horses, pausing at Myra's side. He tried to find words to thank her for what she had done. But somehow, he couldn't talk.

"You will stay here now, Bill, won't you?" she asked.

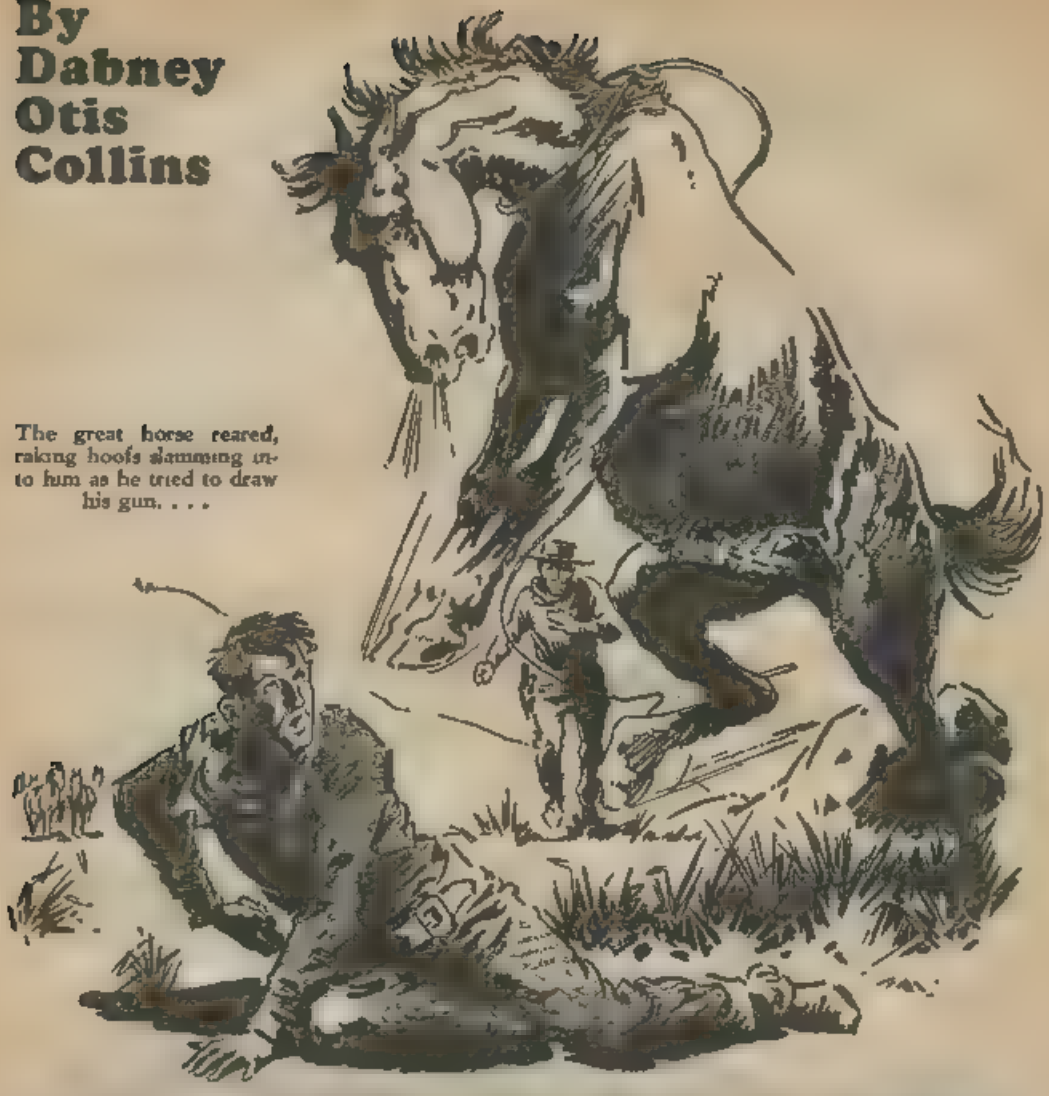
He looked at her, thought suddenly of Red, and answered, "Perhaps, Myra. I don't know. Are you and Red—"

"Red's interested in a girl over at Conifer," Myra said.

Bill Hollister laughed softly. "Then I'll stay, Myra for I think that I'm going to become interested in a girl right here in the Buckhorn."

THE END

By Dabney Otis Collins



The great horse reared, raking hoofs slamming into him as he tried to draw his gun. . . .

BROTHERHOOD OF THE LAWLESS TRAILS

Buck Saunders, men said, was a worthless, locoed fool who'd rather chase wild horses than wear the proud badge of his dead lawman-dad. But "wild horses" to Buck meant only the magnificent outlaw stallion, Blue Streak, which he had sworn to capture—even though a hundred gun-slinging renegades loot his town and gun his neighbors!

BUCK SAUNDERS'S big moment had come. He sat on his heels in a clump of scrub maple near the water hole, listening to the leisurely tramp of horses' hoofs coming down the draw. The magnificent wild stallion, Blue Streak, was leading his band to their nightly drink.

For four years Saunders had hunted the wild stallion, from the Painted Desert to the Grayback Mountains here in Colorado.

And at last his reward was almost in his grasp. He had built a cunningly concealed fence around the water hole, its only entrance a gate, which would drop shut at a pull of the rope he held in his hand. He waited, tense, breathing as a man running a race. The wild horses stopped, then came on.

Then a pistol shot shattered the stillness, into its crashing echoes pulsing a roar of swiftly retreating hoofs.

Buck Saunders leaped up, cursing. The vague shape of a man showed against the wall of brush opposite him. Saunders went toward him with angry strides. And he saw that the man was the outlaw, Mustang Ryan. Then he understood, for Ryan was the one man who wanted Blue Streak, perhaps, as much as Saunders. This was not the first time their trails had crossed in their hunt for the famous stallion.

"Damn you, Ryan!" said Saunders. "If I had a gun on me, we'd settle this thing right now."

Mustang Ryan's square, solid shape was motionless, but he grinned. "Hated to spoil your little trap," he said, "but remember what I told you down in the Mogollons. You can't have Blue Streak. If I don't get him, nobody else will!"

Only a few feet separated the men. It was in Saunders's mind to throw a fist into Ryan's face, to follow it with his lunging body. But a warning alertness had come on the outlaw, and a hand dropped to the butt of his gun. A short laugh broke from him, as he backed slowly away

"So long, Saunders. Next time you see me, I'll be ridin' Blue Streak."

This was pure bragging, and Saunders did not answer as the bushes parted before Ryan, and Saunders was alone.

Bitter, he went to his camp and got into his blankets. In his fitful dreams he saw Mustang Ryan capturing Blue Streak, riding away with mocking laughter, and the vision made him sweat with anger.

TWO days later, needing provisions, Buck Saunders left the Graybacks and rode to the little town of Twin Knobs, where he had been born and brought up.

A strange and ominous silence hung over the empty street. In doorways old men were gathered, talking in awed tones. Riding past the corner beyond the Chinaman's eating house, he saw a crowd pressed against the closed doors of the brick bank building. Children ran excitedly from one side to the other, straining to see over the shoulders of their elders.

"Hey, Buck!"

Toward him hurried Pete Timberlake, the town marshal, his short, bowed legs stirring up streamers of dust. The rolled brim of his hat was jerked askew over his bright blue eyes, his six-shooter slapped his thigh at each impatient step. He stumped eagerly up to Saunders.

"I swear, Buck! Never was so glad to see a man. It's like you was sent for. Listen, son. I want you to hit the trail with me after Mustang Ryan. He—"

"Mustang Ryan?"

"That's the devil. He fogged in here a coupla hours ago, shot Tom Elliot at the bank, and lit out with a gunnysack full of money. Headed for the Graybacks. You know every foot of that country. Come on," he said, fastening hard fingers on Saunders's arm, "the county'll furnish you the best hoss in Hardwinter Jackson's stable."

Saunders shook his head. "Wouldn't mind lendin' you a hand, Pete. But I got other business."

Lightning seemed to dart from the marshal's eyes. "Business!" he exploded. "Chasin' that danged wild stallion all over creation. Call that man's business, when you got a chance to really do somethin'?"

Saunders said coolly, "You're the law; I ain't," and gathered his reins.

Marshal Timberlake moved quickly in front of the horse. "All right. Maybe I did sorta fly offa the handle. I thought a

heap of yore pa, and it hurts me to see Jeff's son throwin' away his chances. But, like you say, that's yore business."

He paused, a softness in his wrinkle-gouged face. "Fact is, Buck, I'm figgerin' on gittin' out when my term's up. That's next year. I'd like to see you come after me. Jeff would of liked it, too."

Saunders imagined himself wearing Timberlake's badge, the same four-pointed copper-centered badge his father had worn with such distinction as marshal of Twin Knobs. The vision clung to Buck.

"I deputized yore kid brother Johnny and three-four others to go after Ryan," the marshal went on, watching him narrowly. "But they won't git him."

"Johnny's liable to do it. He knows the Graybacks. Many's the time we've hunted fuzz-tails in there together."

"No." The marshal shook his head "They'll lose him, sure. I would 'a' went with 'em, only I can't stand fast ridin' no more. But you and me'll trail him down. Come on; we got to hurry."

But the vision of the four-pointed badge was gone now. Saunders shook his head. "Much obliged, Pete. I got me a wild horse to catch."

Timberlake blew up then. "All right!" he shouted, his face dark. "You ain't the only man can trail in the Graybacks. Keep on follerin' Blue Streak. You're wore down to nothin' but skin and bones now. Yore eyes are sunk in like a crazy man's. Keep on, and you'll be plumb locoed. Like that pegleg Yankee captain tryin' to catch that whale—what's his name now—Moby Dick. He went crazy, and so will you!"

Saunders rode on to the livery stable.

BALD, pink-cheeked old Hardwinter Jackson was spraddled in a chair tilted against the clapboard wall. "Hi, Hardwinter!" Saunders called as he quit the saddle. "See you been havin' a little excitement."

"Some," Hardwinter Jackson admitted. "You, Amos!" he bellowed into the dim, tangy coolness of the stable. "C'mere an' git these hosses!" He eyed Saunders steadily. "What'd you tell Pete?"

"About trailin' Ryan? Told him I had something else to do."

"Blue Streak, you mean?" There was a hard edge to the stableman's voice, a gathering of rage in the little eyes under their thick white tufts.

Saunders nodded, as he licked a cigarette together.

Hardwinter Jackson's face grew a deeper pink. "Blue Streak—that's jest it!" he barked, bringing down the legs of his chair. "Throwin' away yore whole life chasin' a blasted broomtail, when yore pa was the best lawman that this or any other town ever seen. Look at you. Shovin' thirty years now, ain't you? What you got to show for it? Nothin'! It's enough to make a man like Jeff Saunders turn over in his grave!"

"Leave the law to lawmen," Saunders retorted

He went on toward the feed store, a sober cast to his lean and weathered face. Hardwinter Jackson's tirade had stirred into unrest a part of him never wholly asleep. Even when he was hot on the trail of Blue Streak, there came moments when he seemed to hear his father's voice, telling him to take up the badge of the law where his father had laid it down.

For Jeff Saunders had been a famous lawman, standing shoulder to shoulder with such star-toters as Billy Tilghman and the Earp boys. From him Buck had inherited the dispassionate viewpoint of the born lawman: The Creator made all things, the mountain sheep and the rattlesnake, the good man and the bad. Each lived according to the law of its creation. One must be saved, the other destroyed

This outlaw, Mustang Ryan, was a wolf preying on peaceful men. He had to go. But Saunders himself held no ill feeling toward men of Ryan's stamp. As he had

often heard his father say, they just did not fit.

A slow smile touched his mouth, and he murmured: "But what's all that got to do with Blue Streak?"

He bought a month's provisions, which took almost all his money. If he failed to capture Blue Streak within this time, he'd be forced to take a job with one of the big outfits, breaking horses. Then again he could pursue the horse that had become part of him.

He was eating a bowl of mulligan in the Chinaman's, when word came that the posse had returned. Someone called from the door that one of the men had been wounded by Ryan. Saunders kept on eating. But when he heard that the injured man was his brother Johnny, he rose from the stool.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Over in the Silver Dollar, lying on a pool table."

Saunders handed the Chinaman a dollar and did not ask for change

HE ANGLED his wide shoulders into the saloon, past the men packed about the table. A blanket had been spread over Johnny, his scuffed boots showing at one end of it, the pale, moist wedge of his face at the other.

Saunders's low voice sounded loudly in the silence: "How are you, Johnnie?"

The boy smiled faintly, but said nothing. His gaze seemed to be fixed on some far-away object. Saunders had seen that look in a man's eyes.

"In the belly," a teamster answered his whispered question. "Bullet's still in thar. Doc orter be here any minute."

But the bullet was taken out of Johnny's chest. Saunders stood closely by, being of what help he could. With strange detachment he watched the deft movements of the surgeon's gloved hands, the play of light on the little knives that so quickly reddened, the deathlike countenance of the youngster on the pool table. And when the last stitch was taken, Saunders had forgotten there ever had been a wild stallion called Blue Streak.

"Will he make it?" he asked the doctor.

The keen eyes behind the thick lenses looked gravely at him. "Yes," was the terse reply.

Saunders carried Johnny in his arms to Mrs. Reed's lodging house. He went then to the livery stable.

Old Hardwinter Jackson, his chair tilted against the wall, did not look at him as he said: "If anybody had of shot Jeff's brother, be danged if Jeff would of run away after no wild hoss."

Saunders passed on into the stable, the half-light hiding his stiff grin.

"If you run into Pete Timberlake up there in the Graybacks," Hardwinter said scornfully, as Saunders rode out of the stable, "don't rope him, thinkin' he's that blasted stallion."

"Which way did Pete go?"

"What you care whichaway he went?"

Saunders turned on him so sharply that Handwinter blinked. "I said, which way!"

Hardwinter Jackson was on his feet, pointing southwest. "Pilot Butte road," he said eagerly. "You're goin' with him, ain't you? I knowed it, quick as you whirled round on me!" He chuckled. "Gosh! I thought it was Jeff, hisself. Go on, son. I know you got it in you. I'll take good care of yore pack animal."

IT WAS a little after two o'clock of this June day when Buck Saunders rode out of Twin Knobs. Three hours later, a steady trot had brought him into the shadow that the great tower of sandstone called Pilot Butte laid across the road. Before him stretched a wide plain, gulch-carved and encrusted with yellowish rock, tilted toward the softly folded green hills. Rising ridge on ridge above the foothills, the Graybacks lifted their crinkled blue to the sun

Mountains no man fully knew, the Graybacks. Saunders came as close to knowing as anyone. Yet each time he had ventured on these heights, hunting the wild horse whose domain it was, he had discovered a new world. Sometimes, in the cathedral-like solitudes, the feeling had come to him that he was intruding where man was never meant to go.

Darkness crept across the land, and a tiny gleam led him to Marshal Timberlake's fire.

"I'll go with you," he said briefly.

"That's fine, son."

And they let it go at that.

Swinging across the wooded skirt of the foothills next morning, Saunders cut the trail of a horse that had been ridden fast from the direction of Twin Knobs. He and Timberlake followed the tracks. The horse-hunter's keen gaze detected a brownish stain on the leaf of a hawthorn. He got down, closely examining the hoof prints. The left front foot was imprinted more faintly than the others, indicating that the horse limped.

Certain now that this was Mustang Ryan's trail, he rode deeper into the mountains.

Near the base of a steep cliff they found the outlaw's horse. Saddle marks on it were still damp. A bullet had raked its left shoulder, the wound was festering. Saunders took a box of screw-worm salve from his saddlebag and treated the wound. Then, telling Timberlake to follow with the horses, he began to search for Ryan's trail.

He called, as the marshal rode away: "Throw me my rope, will you, Pete?"

"I swear! What you want with a rope?"

"Might need it. Can't tell."

Timberlake tossed him the coil of manila rope and rode on, not saying anything. Saunders knew the lawman guessed what he was thinking: That he might get a chance to throw a rope at Blue Streak.

A thread of jute, caught on a buckbrush, showed him where Ryan had started up the mountain. By footprint and broken twig he followed. Yet he kept listening for the stallion's neigh. He had heard it before up here; it was to him the wildest, most musical sound on earth.

Gaining the ridge, he rested on the rock that, the sign showed, Ryan had sat on. There were the two little trenches scooped out of the gravel by his boot heels, a cigarette butt, a broken match. He sent his gaze sweeping down the lodgepole pines covering the slope, out across the wilderness of marching rock to the blue spires and minarets of the back range. Mustang Ryan was out there somewhere, with four hours' start. Blue Streak, too, Saunders thought wistfully. Outlaws both, in a sense . . . .

THE man trail led him across the hogbacks and beaver meadows, an unending succession of ridge and valley, into a deep canyon. The stone floor of this gorge betrayed no foot print. But there were pools of water through which Ryan had splashed, darkly staining the stone.

He climbed out of the canyon up a series of benches that, like a gigantic stairway, mounted tier on tier to the sky. He was a lawman now, every inch of him. Jeff Saunders, himself, could not have trailed a man with more unerring skill, more unshakable persistence. The rope was still looped over his shoulder; he had forgotten it was there.

He came at sunset upon a mesa-like formation rising out of a heavily timbered divide. Shadows veiled Ryan's trail. There Saunders rested, the soft light flowing about him like an invisible tide. Turning his reluctant gaze from the gold-splashed west, he watched a cloud bank in the east become a pillar of fire, its glow filtering through the lavender and purple laid over the hills and hollows. It was at such times, when he stood amid the splendor and majesty of these mountains, and dreamy peace

enfolded all this vast, untouched world, that he felt a sense of guilt in trying to take the wild stallion from his kingdom in the sky.

He went a short distance down the slope and built a fire. He hoped Pete Timberlake, out there somewhere with the horses, would see it.

Stars clustered the sky, white and thick, their cold glitter touching the spruce needles with silver. A breeze sighed over the mountain, the tree tops stirred with light movement. From the brush a pair of eyes reflected the fire's glow. When Saunders laid more wood on the fire, the eyes vanished.

Hours passed before he heard a faint halloo. He answered, his hands cupped to his mouth. Then back came Timberlake's distance-muted shout. Saunders buried the fire under damp earth and descended the slope. Timberlake was waiting there.

"Catch sight of him, Buck?"

"Not yet. I will, tomorrow."

"Son," said Timberlake, cutting a strip of bacon with his pocket knife, "you're goin' to make as good a lawman as yore pa. I can see it. You'll be 'lected marshal of Twin Knobs next year, sure as shootin'."

Buck grinned at him over his coffee cup. "Think I'm sorta tamed now, Pete?"

"Huntin' that stud, you mean? Shucks! That's all water under the bridge."

Saunders thought so, too. All this day he had been putting behind him his old life, mentally adjusting himself to the future. Yes, he would follow the trail blazed by his father.

There was a girl named Sabina, a sheepman's daughter, he had met two years ago while trailing Blue Streak through the Tortillitas, down in Arizona. He had not been able to forget her. She seemed very close to him now. In his dreams that night he saw the dead-looking face of Johnny. He dreamed also of Blue Streak. He awoke with the stallion's bugle call ringing in his ears . . . And realized after a moment it was no dream!

WITH such fury he threw off his blankets, jammed on his hat and began pulling on his boots, that Marshal Timberlake lifted himself on an elbow, calling softly, "Where you goin'?"

"Goin' to catch him." Saunders was on his feet, searching in the darkness for his rope.

"What you mean? Where is he, Buck?"

"Up there. Didn't you hear him?"

"Hear him? I—" He broke off, came wriggling out of his blankets in his socked feet. "You ain't quittin' me for that blasted stallion?"

Saunders scarcely heard him. He found the rope and began to buckle on his gun.

"You listen to me!" Timberlake clamped an angry hand on Saunders' shoulder. "You ain't goin' nowhere, you hear?"

"I got to, Pete."

"Got to, nothin'. I swear, just when you got everything to gain by catchin' Mustang Ryan, you go an' git locoed again!" He paused, then his voice became softer. "What'd Jeff say, if he knowed you was throwin' away yore chances of bein' the next marshal of Twin Knobs? What would he do, in yore fix? Plenty folks have loved hosses—"

"Not like I—like I want Blue Streak."

"Well, maybe—" the old lawman swore as a sharp-edged stone pierced his sock—"Maybe he is the best hoss you ever see. But—"

"I got to have him, Pete," Saunders broke in. "You won't understand. I don't, myself. He's part of me, that's all." Timberlake began to speak, but Saunders rushed on, "I tried to forget him, tried hard. Kept tellin' myself all day yesterday that I was goin' to leave him be and take up lawin'. I thought that's the way it would be. But it's no use. I'll never rest, I'll never be myself, till Blue Streak is mine." He started up the slope.

Timberlake heard only the swishing of spruce boughs, the crunching of needles under Saunders' hurrying boots.

"You hear me, Buck? Come back here, you crazy fool!" Timberlake stopped, rage and defeat bleak in his face. He raised both fists, crying shrilly, "Go on, then! You'll never be nothin'. You—you horse-crazy fool!" he screamed.

Saunders pulled his lean body to the ridge in the glory of the sunrise. Halting only to recover his breath, he lifted his gaze to the dark mass of mountains in front of him, trying to pierce the mists that cloaked the marching spruce.

Like a man driven, as truly he was, he plowed down the slope, splashed through a black ribbon of water, and climbed. Again he heard the stallion's call. Closer, to his left. He angled up the steep ascent, grudging each instant lost by having to go around some upthrust of rock. The crest of this divide was rounded and pine-studded, rolling up to the flank of a higher mountain. Saunders was almost running.

Suddenly he stopped, rigid, his gaze fixed on the chimney-like summit of the mountain. An exclamation, like a prayer, broke from him.

On a ledge below the butte, as if to salute the new-born day, stood Blue Streak.

EVEN at this distance Saunders saw the glint of sunlight on the arched and tawny mane. Like a statue the great horse stood there, head proudly lifted, tail cascading to earth. A king, surveying his kingdom. Then the stallion turned and passed out of sight behind a point of rock. Behind their lord and master moved a single file of mares: fifteen, Saunders counted. Knowing the horses were coming to water, he hastened to intercept them.

At each step the desire to own Blue Streak burned in him more fiercely. There was no thought now of the heritage of his father, of his wounded brother, of the yellow-haired girl waiting for him in the Tortillitas. Gone was all that. Blue Streak must belong to him! Life held nothing else.

Moving as rapidly as he could over the tumbled earth, he came to a deep canyon that appeared to lead directly away from the butte on which the horses had stood. There were hoof-prints down there, apparently fresh. He started down the wall.

The stallion's cry, sharper than he had ever heard it, whistled from the lower distance. Echoing out of it, sounded the muffled beat of hoofs.

"They're comin' back," Saunders said aloud.

Now was his chance. If he could reach the canyon bottom in time . . . But he didn't. Less than halfway down, he saw a long-barreled sorrel mare careen around a shoulder of the wall, keen ears pointed forward, head swaying from side to side, her small hoofs flashing back the somber light. Behind the lead mare rushed a river of mustangs—duns, grays and blacks—close enough for him to see the hereditary dark line extending down their backbones. The last mare swept past.

Blue Streak, his magnificent head erect, his eyes white-rimmed and rolling, charged around the shoulder of rock. It was only a glimpse of the broad chest and clean-limbed blue body, the smoothly gliding muscles and flowing motion. Then he was past, his teeth bared to snap at the mare nearest him, his tail lashing the earth.

Saunders drew in a deep breath, not conscious that he trembled. He started again down the wall, wondering what had frightened the horses. A cougar, possibly, or a cinnamon bear.

Then, while he was still some fifty feet from the bottom, he saw what had frightened them

A big, square-built man, carrying a coiled rope in one hand and a partly filled

gunnysack in the other, came around the shoulder.

Saunders drew his gun. "Ryan," he called softly.

MUSTANG RYAN'S heavy-set shape came to instant stop. The rope fell from his right hand and it suddenly held a gun. Only his head moved now, quickly, from side to side.

"Lay that gun down."

The outlaw bent and laid his six-shooter on the ground. He looked up, showing Saunders a broad, crafty face that was without fear

"What you want with me, Buck?"

Saunders did not answer that. "What makes you think you can catch Blue Streak?" he demanded, surprised at the coldness of his own voice.

"I'm goin' to catch him. I always told you that"

"You lie, Ryan."

"I'll show you who's lyin'."

Here was clear challenge, a rivalry bared to its bones. Not lawman and outlaw were they, but two wild horse hunters, each intent on capturing the greatest prize that could come to them.

"All right," Saunders said. "Then we start from right here."

"Right here," echoed Mustang Ryan. He picked up his rope and his gun and went on up the canyon. Buck Saunders climbed out of the canyon, continuing along its rim.

The showdown came about an hour before sunset. Saunders was moving up a deeply shadowed chasm into which the wild horse band had been turned. A hollow drumming warned him the horses had changed direction and were racing toward him. He ran to an abrupt angle in the wall, began feverishly to build a loop. How those horses were coming! Like the roar of water through a broken dam.

For the twentieth time he risked a look from behind the spur. But this time his eyes bulged, his breathing stopped. Blue Streak came toward him, arrow-swift, head jerking from side to side, eyes blazing defiance and anger, ears flat to his head.

Saunders drew quickly back, his loop spinning out in a wide circle. In this instant of terrible suspense he came as close to praying as he knew.

"I can't miss," his dry lips whispered. "I can't miss!"

The stallion's beautiful head shot past the spur. Saunders's arm straightened, the noose hissed thinly. Too far, he thought. But, no! Over the outstretched head swooped the rope, around Blue Streak's neck.

Before Saunders could dig in his heels, he was snatched forward as a chip at the end of a string. His body slammed the stony earth, breath left his lungs in a single gasp. Dragged at flesh-ripping speed, yet he held grimly to the rope, as if only death could tear it from him.

His slide ended against a clump of willows, and he came dazedly to his feet. Through the lacy branches he saw the stallion, head lowered, his breathing slow and harsh. The rope was choking him. Though he hated to see the horse suffer, wild elation swept him. He had caught Blue Streak!

Suddenly the horse whirled, emitting a squeal of such fierceness that the rope all but dropped from Saunders' hands. With flattened ears and distended, reddened nostrils, with rolling eyes and gnashing teeth, he rushed at this two-legged creature—the one thing he hated and feared.

SAUNDERS had no time to defend himself. He felt the steaming breath in his face He leaped back. The horse reared over him. Raking hoofs slammed into him. There was only one thing he could do. He jerked out his gun. He must kill his horse he loved as life itself!

Poised to strike the death blow, Blue Streak was skewed violently sidewise.

Saunders whirled over, a broken rib shooting red-hot pain through him. Mustang Ryan was at the end of the tight rope, heels dug in, leaning far back.

Blasting a peal of incredible rage, Blue Streak lunged at Ryan. Ryan dodged, but not quickly enough. His hat flew off and crimson splashed the side of his face.

Saunders dived for Ryan's rope. No quicker, no surer loop was ever thrown. As the maddened horse pivoted and charged at Ryan, the noose encircled his fore feet. Saunders pulled, every muscle strained to the bursting point. Blue Streak twisted in air, smiting the earth with such force that breath gushed out of him.

Cougar-quick, Saunders tied the fore feet. Scarcely was the knot finished, when Mustang Ryan stood up from the horse's trussed hind feet. The men looked at each other.

"Well, you got him," said Mustang.

Saunders shook his head. "I couldn't of done it, without you."

Silence lay between them. Their gaze turned to the magnificent body prostrate in the dust. Unconquerable fires blazed in the stallion's eyes. Rebellious muscles ridged his thighs and neck. Defiance strained every inch of him.

Saunders looked up, seeing Ryan's steady gaze on him. "You saved my life, Mustang," he said. "I ain't forgettin' that."

"You've already evened that up, Buck." Ryan paused. "Well, he's yours."

Buck Saunders grinned. "You don't want him, any more'n I do. He ain't meant to be rode, nohow." Ryan nodded. "He belongs up here. Let's turn him loose."

"I been waitin' for you to say that."

They untied the knots, and Blue Streak was up in an instant, trotting away. A single triumphant blast whistled from his nostrils, then there was only the hollow striking of his hoofs.

"Mustang," Saunders said slowly, "you're too good a man to spend your life dodgin' the law. Why don't you straighten out?"

Ryan looked directly at him. "I been thinkin' the same thing, Buck. And I'm goin' to do it. I'll take you to the place where I cached the bank money. It's all there. Here's my hand on it."

Saunders gripped the big, square hand.

Ryan's voice trembled with the depth of his feeling, but he shook his head. "That'll come later, Buck. I couldn't feel that I was free if I knew that I'd be hunted. Maybe, if I can prove that I'm going straight, and somehow make it up to you for your brother . . . ."

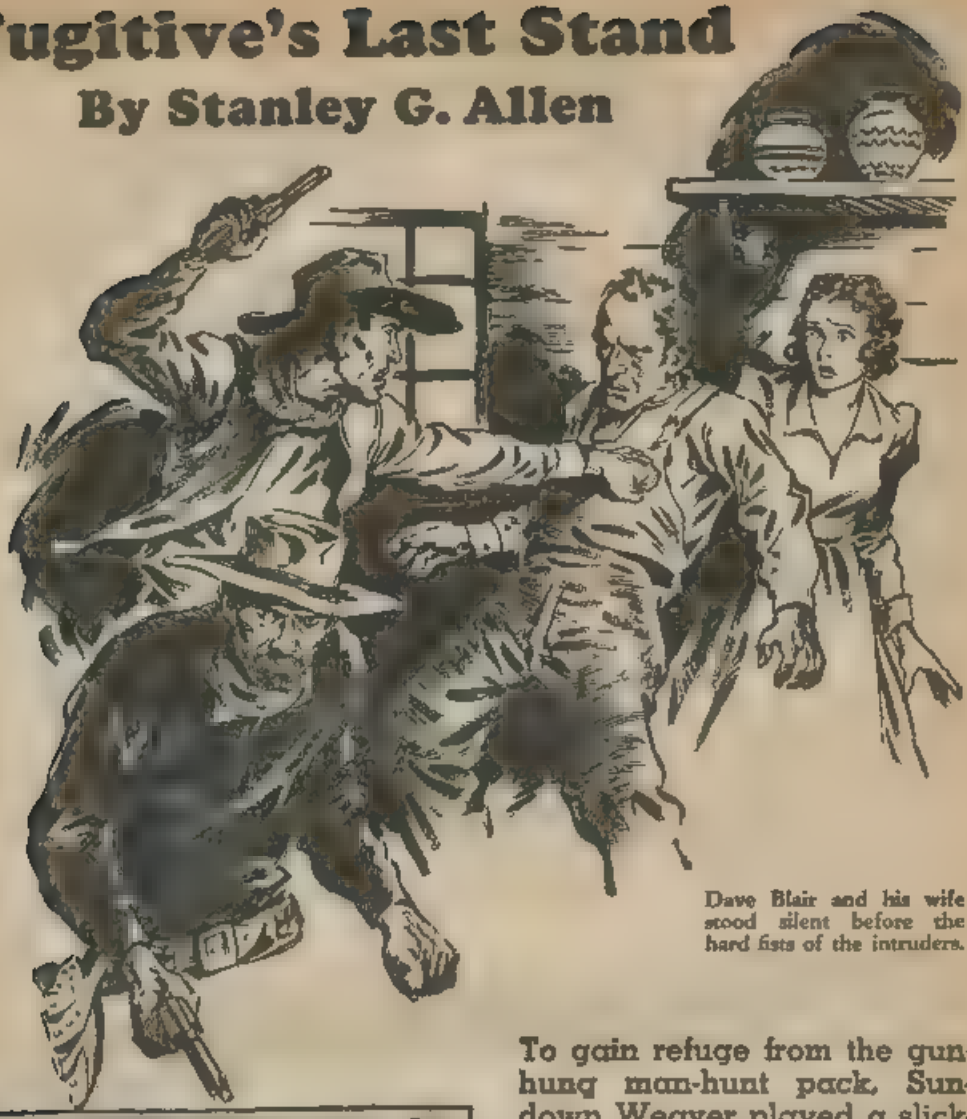
"Prison would be hell on a feller like you, specially," Saunders said. "Look! If there's a chance of gettin' you paroled in my custody, an'—" He broke off. "By golly! With Timberlake's help, I think we got a chance! An' if I'm marshal next year, I'd want to have a spread—a little horse ranch—where I could spend vacations. I'd sure need some man out there that knows horses and likes 'em, like you do. A feller I could trust!"

"Better wait till we come to the parole part of it, Buck," Ryan said huskily. "It don't do to count too far ahead. Let's get back to town."

Saunders felt strangely at peace as they climbed the canyon wall. He was already thinking what he would say to Pete Timberlake, and seeing that friendly grin in Pete's faded blue eyes . . . .

Fugitive's Last Stand

By Stanley G. Allen



Dave Blair and his wife stood silent before the hard fists of the intruders.

To gain refuge from the gun-hung man-hunt pack, Sundown Weaver played a slick-deck trick on the occupants of that pathetic nester shack. But how could even a hunted rustler like Sundown leave thin little Dave Blair and his wife, to face alone the red vengeance of a cattle-king on the kill?

THE gangling man with the scarred right cheek was red-headed by nature, and a red fox by instinct and reputation. That reputation had been won by his ability to elude the human, kill-hungry packs which often bayed along his trail. But today as he spurred a jaded horse down into a bend of Cottonwood Creek, he was a gaunt, hard-pressed fox. And the human packs were closing in on him.

Unobserved by a woman who was washing clothes in the shade of a homesteader's shack, or by a man who was

greasing a wagon down near the barn, the fugitive gained the grove of cottonwoods on the creek bank. He was wondering whether to go up or downstream when his flinty gray eyes sighted a small youngster, not more than two-years old, toddling around on the bank of the swift-running creek.

Suddenly there was a gleam in the fugitive's eyes. The rider spurred forward, caught the child up by the back of his clothes, rode out into the stream and ducked him briefly. Then the fugitive yelled and started back to the creek bank, with the dripping, squalling child held safely in his arms.

That wild yell brought the mother running from her wash tubs. The father, too, was clumping around the corner of the barn, hurrying toward the rider now emerging from the swift water.

"Danny! Baby!" cried the woman, clutching her saturated offspring from the hunted man's arms. Then she turned to the gaunt homesteader. "I—I thought he was down by the barn with you, Dave," she said shakily

"He was, for a while," gulped the husband. "Aw, don't cry about it, Madge This stranger fished him outa the crick in time."

"Yes, thank God!" sobbed the frightened woman. "But in another minute—" She looked at the swirling current below the cabin. Then her tear-blurred eyes turned to the stranger. "I don't know how to thank you, mister. If you hadn't happened along just when you did. . . " Slowly her expression altered as she studied a scarred, freckled face.

"Yeah, I'm him," said the gangling man. "Sundown "

"Sundown!" echoed Dave Blair, the homesteader. His calloused fingers twitched a little. "Well, Sundown, cattle rustler or not, name it if there's anything we can do for you."

"I could stand some grub, and a place to hide. Vance Warwick, your neighbor, and his riders are closin' in on me fast But you don't want to try hidin' me. It'll only mean trouble for you and the missus if—"

"Trouble, hell!" broke in the homesteader. "How about it, Madge?"

"Hide him!" she decreed promptly. "After what's he's done for us, there's nothing we won't do for him. And proud to!"

Sundown, cattle rustler by profession, red fox by experience, protested. But the grateful parents wouldn't be denied. Blair suggested that the rustler's horse, a jaded bay with a bullet-torn jaw, be led downstream where Cottonwood Creek brawled swiftly into a rock-walled ravine, and there be mercifully killed. There, the silt-reddened waters would cover the carcass; hide it from the prying eyes of men circling along the rims of the ravine.

Sundown readily consented. So, five minutes later the cattle-rustler himself was lying on cramped quarters between the ground and the floor of a homesteader's cabin. The three unmortared foundation stones which had been hastily removed to allow his entrance to this dank, Stygian refuge were back in place.

Mrs. Blair was back at her wash tubs. Her husband was greasing his wagon when hoofs came thundering toward the cabin

"HEY, you nester!" bawled a deep voice. "Where's the red-headed skunk that just rode down here on a bay horse?"

Sundown tensed as he waited to catch the reply. It was generally known that Vance Warwick, owner of the DL outfit, had placed a five-hundred dollar reward on the fiery red head. Now Warwick himself was asking Blair a very pointed question. Thinking of what that five-hundred-dollar reward would mean to the poverty-stricken man and woman, Sun-

down held his breath for the answer.

Then Blair was calling: "I ain't seen nobody ridin' past here, Warwick."

"The hell you ain't! Not more'n ten minutes ago, at the most, a rider come over that ridge there! You must've seen him—unless you're blind as a bat!"

While Vance Warwick rode on to confer with Blair, the DL owner's son, big Chet Warwick, and three other riders rode up to question Mrs. Blair. Questions that became bluntly insulting when the homesteader's wife stoutly lied to save the rustler crouched under the floor of her little home.

"You nor your nester husband wouldn't go outa your way none to help us Warwicks ketch a rustlin' skunk that's been stealin' DL cattle for the last ten years!" Chet Warwick rasped to the nervous woman. "You don't like us no better'n we like these damned range-grabbin' nesters!"

"We haven't bothered you any," the woman declared. "I wish you Warwicks would quit bothering us. Let us alone. And start now."

"If we find you're lyin' to save that red head's scalp, you'll wish you hadn't!" was Chet Warwick's threat as he whirled his horse and rode toward the barn.

STRANGE thoughts swirled through the rustler's mind as he lay there, a hunted fox crouching in his hole, listening to the stormy abuse heaped upon the homesteaders. Sometimes those flinty eyes of his, peering upward, caught glimpses of cursing, thwarted men searching the little shack. Once between the cracks of warped floor-boards, he saw Blair and his wife stand bravely before the hard fists and swining guns-muzzles of the intruders. Those men would have gloated over his gangling body swinging from one of those cottonwoods down by the creek.

The search went up and down the stream, through the barn and dugout cellar; through every patch of brush. Once more, clumping boots sounded on the floor above Sundown, and spurs jangled past foundation rocks—tinkling rowels whose music vibrated through the long form flattened behind those rocks

At last Vance Warwick and his men rode downstream, disappearing along the rim of the ravine. But it was hours before the sentry, left behind to spy, deserted his post. Not until then did Dave Blair slide away the rocks which stood between a rustler and the men thirsting to lynch him.

"It's all safe now, I guess, Sundown," said Blair.

Stiffly the fugitive wriggled from his hiding place. The two men went into the cabin where Mrs. Blair had prepared supper. And it wasn't until they walked into the glow of the oil lamp that Sundown knew why Dave Blair's voice had sounded strange.

The little homesteader's lips were swollen and split, too numb to properly form words. His nose was discolored, and patches of hide had been torn by brutal fists from his face.

Sundown looked across the supper table at that battered countenance. And wasn't as hungry as he had been.

"Warwick!" he said. "Him and that overgrowed son of his beat hell outa you, Blair."

"Yeah, but still they didn't get no information." The game little homesteader tried valiantly to smile at his wife and Sundown.

"I'm proud of you, Dave," said the woman. And Sundown's troubled eyes watched the tears trickling down her pale cheeks. "Every one of them blows you took paid off a little of our debt of gratitude. You're a man, clean through!"

Gratitude! That word stuck in Sundown's craw as he glanced again at that bruised and battered face across the table.

For the man had suffered, to pay off a debt he didn't owe in the first place! While in his high-chair, a blue-eyed baby, none the worse for his brief ducking today, chortled playfully.

Sundown didn't look at Dave Blair any more. He couldn't. His red head bowed over his plate, he ate in silence.

The meal, bread, beans and canned tomatoes, was over when the rustler said: "I'll be needin' a horse, Blair. I'd like to buy that buckskin out there in your corral."

"He's yours," replied the homesteader. "Take him."

"I'll buy him," Sundown parried. "You've already done more for me than I deserve. So you and neighbor Warwick don't get along none too well, eh?"

"He's made it tough for us, all right. After what's happened today, I expect he'll make it tougher. But he can't do any more'n kill me, I guess."

"Don't say that, Dave," said his wife. And Sundown caught the terror in her look.

IT WAS moonlight when Sundown swung aboard a buckskin horse. Then riding over to the woman who, with her bruised husband stood watching him, he handed her a leather bag taken from his pocket.

"Now, Sundown—" She started to protest.

"Take it," he said gently. "You'll find fifteen hundred currency there. Money I got from the last two batches of DL steers I stole. Buy yourselves some cows and calves."

"Hold on," Blair remarked. "You don't owe us—"

"You mean, you didn't owe *me* anything today," cut in the man with the scarred cheek. "Little Danny wouldn't've got all wet today, if I hadn't packed him out in the crick and ducked him. A cheap little trick I played to save my own hide. But maybe I'll make it up to you. And before the night's over."

He was gone then, loping the buckskin upstream. He didn't turn to look back at the two staring persons left behind. He angled up the same ridge he had descended today, gained the heights of a broad tableland and set his course toward the Wolf Mountains looming off to the west.

Six miles from Cottonwood Creek, Sundown tied his buckskin horse in a clump of willows and made his way afoot, slowly, warily, toward a big ranch house.

Once he paused, contemplated two saddles on the corral fence, and continued his silent way, keeping always to the shadows; a red fox on the prowl.

Again he paused to peer through a lighted window. Then he was at the doorway of that room, his flinty eyes watching two men, big men, sitting beside a table on which stood a partially emptied bottle of whisky.

They were talking about the man-hunt which had taken place today, a hunt which the DL punchers were still conducting.

"They'll get him this time!" Vance Warwick was predicting.

"Here's hopin'," said burly Chet Warwick, hoisting his glass. "I told 'em to drag him up here on the end of a rope if they ketched him."

"THEY don't have to drag him. He's here!"

As Sundown spoke those words his voice had lost all the gentleness bestowed —with fifteen hundred dollars—on a homesteader and his wife tonight. Now his speech was flat, toneless; the echo of steel grating against steel.

Two glasses jarred back upon the table as Vance Warwick and his son turned. Their glittering dark eyes, evidence of kinship and kindred instincts, burned at the gangling man standing in the door-

way, a man whose long thumbs were hooked in a cartridge belt from which were suspended two guns.

"Of all the guts!" rumbled Vance Warwick. "Comin' here—"

"Yeah, comin' here to tell you there'll be no more huntin' for me, Warwick," Sundown told him. "And there'll be no more beatin' up a poor damned little homesteader that's only half your size—but more of a man than you and your son put together!"

"He was down there at Blair's place," Chet Warwick rasped. "Wait'll we see that damned nester again!"

"You won't see him again," Sundown conjectured softly, flinty eyes burning on the fuel of hate. "You've run other homesteaders off'n that Cottonwood Crick place. But you won't run Dave Blair off—and maybe kill him doin' it."

"What do you know about—"

"See this scar on my cheek, Mr. Warwick? That was done by a fire—when I wasn't much older than Blair's little kid. Some low-crawlin' snake about your size and color set fire to a homesteader's shack. A shack that stood where Blair's cabin is standin' now. My dad damn near burned his hands off gettin' me outa that fire trap."

"So you've got a last name, have you?" Warwick stormed. "Some of that poverty-stricken Weaver tribe that I kicked off my range years back!"

"That's it—Weaver," Sundown answered. "And that's why I haven't stole nobody's steers but yours, you carcass-pickin' coyote. I'm takin' another bunch of 'em tonight."

"Damned if you are!" roared the cowman, snaking at his gun as he leaped from his chair.

That movement was Chet Warwick's cue to go into action, too. Hate that had smouldered through the years was suddenly bursting into the white hot flame of battle. And Sundown Weaver's slim, quick hands were diving at holsters like striking serpents. In that split second while steel slid from leather, while eye met eye in the clashing fierceness of killer lust, Death came thundering down this valley of the Wolf Mountain foothills.

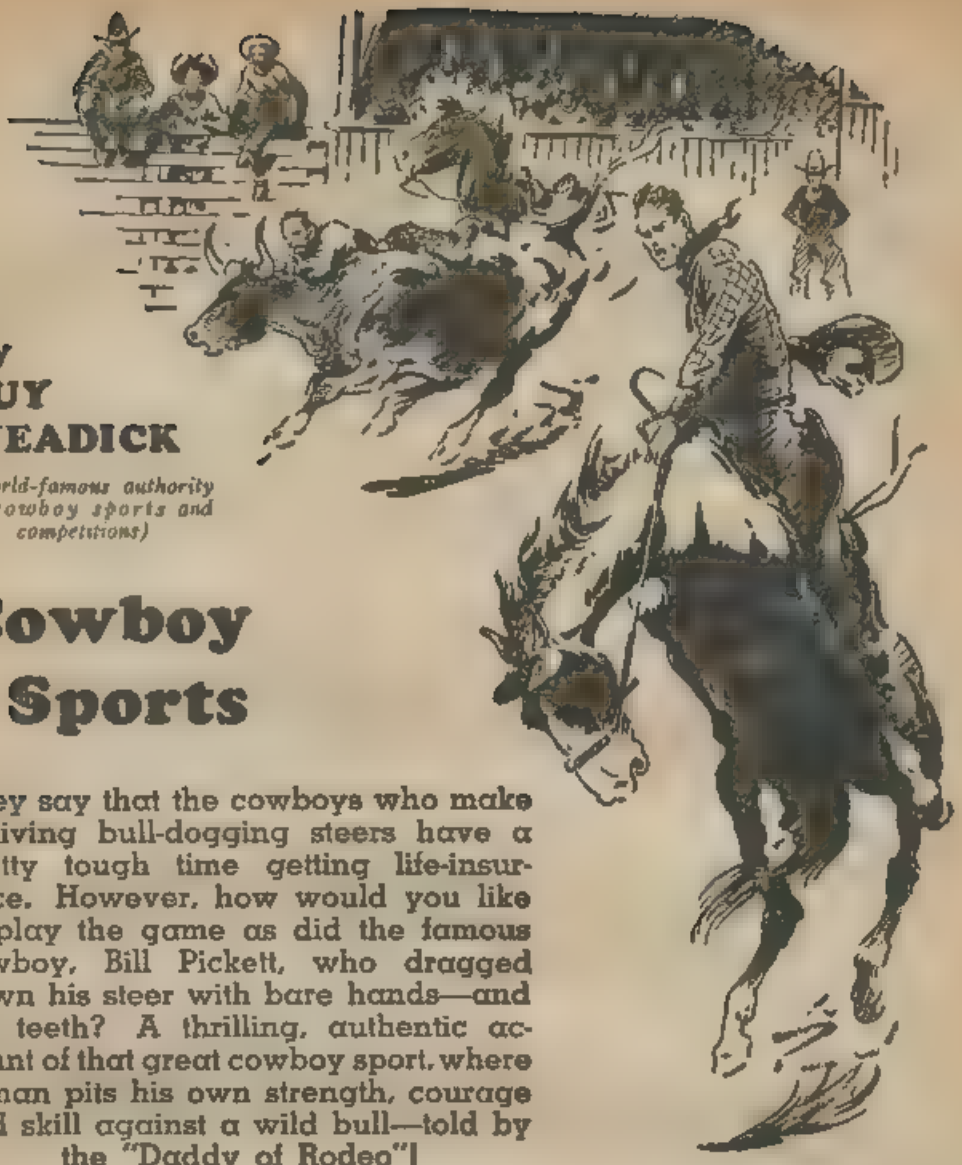
Slivers of flame darted from the guns in Sundown Weaver's hands. Vance Warwick spun half way around and tumbled into a slumping heap against the wall. He tried to get up, but another slug blasted the life from his writhing twisting body.

That one shot spouting from Chet Warwick's frantically-drawn gun ripped through the bandanna draped around Sundown's neck, took a little hide with it. But that was young Warwick's last shot, as well as his first. Two steady .45's spat their flame-winged lead at him, slugs that bit into his body and turned this noise-rocked room into a swirling hell of flinty gray eyes—the triumphant eyes of Sundown Weaver.

For a moment Sundown stood there looking down at the two men he had slain. Then, slowly, he turned, holstered his smoking guns and walked toward the willows where his horse was tied. . . .

At midnight, and herding a bunch of fat DL steers before him, the gangling man was heading through a moonlit canyon of the Wolf Mountains. And meanwhile, DL riders, driven by the orders of a man now dead, were busy searching the Cottonwood Creek country for a rustler they would never find.

Sundown Weaver, however, wasn't gloating over his victory, or the money these steers would bring. He was thinking of a work-worn woman, a game little man named Dave Blair—and a two-year-old kid; three persons for whom his flaming guns had made the world safe. . . .



By GUY WEADICK

(World-famous authority on cowboy sports and competitions)

Cowboy Sports

They say that the cowboys who make a living bull-dogging steers have a pretty tough time getting life-insurance. However, how would you like to play the game as did the famous cowboy, Bill Pickett, who dragged down his steer with bare hands—and his teeth? A thrilling, authentic account of that great cowboy sport, where a man pits his own strength, courage and skill against a wild bull—told by the "Daddy of Rodeo"!

ONE of the most thrilling events upon a program featuring feats of cowboy skill, is that of steer bull-dogging, as it was originally called. But in later years, it has been variously known as steer wrestling, and steer decorating

About every Wild West entertainment in the past twenty years has presented this event in some form or other—even though it never has been a practical part of a cowboy's ranch or range work, such as riding or roping. However, when presented by experienced men with the proper stock, it's a genuine thriller; on the other hand, when attempted by novices using the wrong kind of steers, it's a flop, and a most thoroughly disappointing performance.

Owing to these inferior performances, humane societies and their affiliations have made their objections to cowboy sports and contests. Every effort should be made to stop such shoe-string presentations as they can only harm the legitimate offerings, which when presented by properly experienced performers and with the right kind of livestock, causes no harm to the animal—although the cowboy takes risks in plenty.

Some rodeo press agents have stressed the fact that bulldogging was first presented by the early Greeks and some have even attempted to prove it. That, no doubt, made excellent copy for the attraction so publicised, but the fact still remains that true credit for its origin, at least in this nation, must go to Will Pickett, a Negro cowboy from Texas. He was the originator of steer bulldogging in his native State, at about the turn of the last century.

Down at Taylor, Texas, there lived a family of Negro cowboys named Pickett. They were at times engaged by various ranches, and were bronco riders and ropers of no mean degree in their day.

One day, while Bill Pickett and some other cowboys were working on a ranch, putting cattle from a corral into a chute, one big old steer got on the prod and refused to go through. After some delay, Pickett ran alongside the animal on foot, and grasping both horns, twisted the steer's head sideways. He then leaned over and caught hold of the beast's lip with his own teeth, and thus led the steer into the chute.

This action set up an immediate discussion among the hands as to just what a man on horseback, using only his bare hands and his teeth, could accomplish toward putting a wild steer down on its side on the ground.

So Pickett decided to give it a try.

The cowboys cut a steer from a herd. Pickett mounted his horse, and assisted by another rider, termed the "hazer", followed the single steer. Pickett endeavored to get his horse as close alongside the fleeing animal, on the left side, while the hazer worked from the steer's right, crowding it close to Pickett.

WHEN the Negro thought the opportune moment had arrived, he kicked away both stirrups and made a flying leap for the steer's horns, grasping them with both hands. Then, his feet dragging on the ground, he finally brought the steer to a stop. Exerting his great strength, he gradually turned the head sideways, and leaning over caught the animal's lip with his own teeth. But the most difficult and dangerous part was still to come.

Suddenly lifting both hands high in the air and away from the horns, he leaned backward and by sheer strength brought the animal flat on its side, to the ground. Pickett's body was underneath the animal's neck.

After considerable practice, he became proficient in "laying down" in this manner some mighty wild long horn cattle. Next a starting line was made and time taken from the time Pickett crossed the line riding after the steer until he had it flat on it's big side.

Although he and his brothers had often participated in local riding and roping contests, Bill Pickett and his "bulldogging stunt," as some one had named it, soon became a sought-after attraction, to show at other celebrations farther afield. It was not listed in the competitive events, for the simple reason that there was no one else doing it. Later, on his brothers became accomplished in the feat, and gave numerous exhibitions.

Bulldogging first got its wide publicity as a thriller—outside of the local district of its origin—when the Miller Brothers, owners of the famous 101 Ranch at Bliss, Oklahoma—now Marland—staged a big Western entertainment in honor of the National Editorial Association, comprising hundreds of newspaper men from all over the country, who visited there in the early summer of 1905.

They called it the "Buffalo Chase" and the program consisted of such stunts as Indian pow-wows, dances, a buffalo hunt by mounted Indians equipped with bows and arrows, cowboy and Indian races, bronco riding, steer roping, etc. The buffalo was used for a barbecue.

The Miller Boys brought Bill Pickett up from Texas and he put on his bull-

dogging. It turned out to be the feature of the entire celebration, so chosen by the newspaper men themselves, as something original, thrilling and most dangerous to the cowboy. They dispatched reams of copy regarding it to their various papers, in all parts of the country.

In their dispatches, they referred to Pickett and his bulldogging as "Bill Pickett, the dusky demon of Texas, jumping from the back of a galloping horse to the horns of a wild longhorn steer, stopping it with his bare hands, and throwing it to the ground with his teeth."

That briefly was bulldogging as it originated and from which has sprung, present day steer wrestling and steer decorating.

Among those who witnessed the exhibition that day was Carl Creswell, a cowman formerly from Aravada, Wyoming. He was returning from a trip south and had stopped off on his way to Calgary, Canada, where he was engaged as a brand inspector at the stockyards.

AFTER contacting Pickett, he obtained an exclusive option on his services for three months, deciding to arrange bookings for him in the Northwest. Back at Calgary he interested Blue Osborne, a former Texas cowman, then running a ranch in Alberta to go in with him in presenting Pickett.

At the time, Calgary held an annual Fair with the usual agricultural and amusement features, common at small country fairs. Among these attractions was a riding exhibition by a half dozen local bronco busters. Creswell and Osborne booked Pickett and his bulldogging stunt as the feature of the Fair. He was an immediate sensation.

Then, obtaining a few boys to ride and rope in addition to Pickett's contest, Creswell and Osborne arranged further bookings in the Northwest for the little combination, the writer being included in the outfit. After several engagements, Pickett returned South. In October, 1905 he sailed from New York bound for South America, in company with Clay McGonagil, Joe Gardner, Billy Connell, Spence Jowell, Len Driver, Wiley Hill and Ira Driver, all top Texas cowboys, ropers and riders. With Pickett to bulldog they'd give their exhibitions in the Southern republics.

After his return to the United States, Pickett exhibited throughout the Southwest, and for many years after was with Miller Brothers, when they organized their touring 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show.

It might be mentioned here that the Miller Brothers' show was the first traveling Wild West show to present bulldogging and it developed more bulldoggers earlier in the business than anyone else.

Among those most prominent bulldoggers following Pickett were Lon Seeley, Buffalo Vernon, Pat Long, Frank—"Scout"—Maish, Dell Blancett, Charlie Tipton, Estevan Clemento, Lafe Lewman, Hoot Gibson, Ben Corbett, Mike Hastings, Jim Massey, Leonard McCoy, and several others.

As the stunt began to be presented at distances from the ranching country, objections and protests against it were made by humane societies and their affiliations. It was not long before throwing steers by the teeth was proven to be unacceptable to the general public, and so it was eliminated.

Up to this time, a few of the western communities holding annual cowboy competitions had used it only as an event of a strictly exhibition nature. But as the number of cowboys increased who listed bulldogging among their activities, some contests added it to their competitive events. Rules were made to govern it and time was taken.

The first competitive rules governed what was termed "hoolihaning". This was an even wilder demonstration, and certainly harder on both men and steers than

throwing them with the teeth. In it the "dogger" as the contestant was called, and his hazer were stationed, mounted a chalk line, either on the race track or in the arena. Another chalk line, ten feet ahead of where they stood, was presided over by a starter with a flag.

A steer was cut from the herd, followed by a crowd of yelling cowboys and started on its way. By the time he crossed the line where contestant and hazer stood, the animal was usually traveling with the speed of a streamlined train. At this point all other horsemen pulled up, and when the steer crossed the second line ten feet ahead of contestant, the flag dropped and time started.

HOOLIHANING consisted in the dogger leaping from his horse to the horns of the steer, and his weight, together with the speed of the animal, resulted in both steer and dogger turning a "cat" in the air. The idea was that after the somersault the dogger was not to let the steer regain its feet, but flip it over on its broad side, all four feet sticking out straight. Then he threw up one hand for time and held the animal in that position until the field judge had decided the steer was as should be on the ground.

It was wild and it was dangerous, and it called for expert judgment on the part of the contestant in just the right split second to jump and catch the steer off balance, so his weight could throw the animal. Although many boys received injuries in hoolihaning many of them were very fast and some excellent time records were made under the rules. I think the fastest time ever made on an individual steer under these rules at a timed contest was made by Estevan Clemento, the Mexican dogger at the Stampede, produced by the writer at Calgary, Canada, in 1912, Clemento's time was just seven and one fifth seconds.

Wild Mexican steers weighing about 850 pounds were used. The winner of that contest on a two steer average was Oscar Lawrence of Sulphur, Oklahoma, recently State Senator from his district in Oklahoma.

After bulldogging had progressed awhile under those rules, with many men being injured the steers getting horns knocked off and hips knocked down, the rules were changed to what was called a "twist down", contest. That was about the same, excepting the steer must be kept on its feet. It had to be brought to a full stop, and then —twisted down.

Later the name "bulldogging" was generally eliminated, and the event was referred to as "steer wrestling". Rules again changed. The steer was released from a chute, and when he has crossed a line a certain number of feet from the chute, the wrestler or dogger, as the contestant is still called, and his hazer, may cross the line, lap and tap with the animal. Time then starts.

The dogger must jump from horse to steer, bring him to a stop, and in case he knocks the steer off his feet in the leap, he must let the animal regain all four feet. Then the contestant puts the animal down flat on either side, all four feet sticking out straight.

It is generally conceded that the best type of cattle for this event, is longhorn Mexican steers weighing about 750 pounds. They're light, run fast, and in a contest with performers of experience and ability, are thrown in an exciting manner —and no harm is done the animal. Heavy cattle, of the native type, are usually too slow and lumbering. As a rule when they're used, they slow up the performance.

In some districts where the proper kind of cattle cannot be readily obtained, "steer decorating" has been substituted. The writer originated steer decorating at Calgary, while producing the Stampede there. For the first time in history, doggers jumped at wild Brahma steers, conceded to be the wildest and best cattle for rodeos.

The steer, the decorator and the hazer all left the starting place, just as in steer wrestling. The decorator has two heavy rubber bands, with a foot of red ribbon, attached to each band These bands are slipped over the tips of the fingers on each hand

He then jumps from his horse to the steer; but is not required to throw the steer or even stop him. However, he must slip each band over either horn, before the time is taken. He may turn steer loose the moment he has put on the ribbon.

With wild Brahma steers, running like race horses, this stunt is far wilder than it sounds in the telling. It takes a well-mounted, experienced dogger with plenty of guts to get this job done on Brahma cattle. Yet, Paddy Ryan did it in something just under four seconds. Lower time has been made in decorating—but not on Brahma cattle.

In California, decorating is done in about the same manner, excepting that Brahma cattle are not used, nor are the ribbons placed on the horns. Instead a rubber band is slipped up over the steer's nose.

Many fast times have been made in steer wrestling if I recall correctly, the best was made in 1937 by Hub Whiteman. Three and one fifth seconds Whiteman took to complete his job. This ties a time made by one of the other boys.

There are many good doggers today in the rodeo field. In the following order, these men have the best records for 1937: Gene Ross, Sayre, Okla.; Hub Whiteman, Clarksville, Tex.; Rusty McGinty, Plains, Tex., and Everett Bowman, Hillside, Ariz.; They hold the highest number of points in steer wrestling, while in steer decorating, the highest for the past year, are, in the order named: Art Lund, Raymond, Alberta, Canada; Harry Knight, Florence, Ariz.; Joe Mendes, Visalia, Calif.; and Herman Linder, Cardston, Alberta, Canada.

Bill Pickett died at the age of 66, about five years ago, from the effects of a kick from a horse, at the 101 ranch in Oklahoma. He threw steers until he was over 55 years old. The most remarkable feat ever attempted by a man in steer throwing was done by Pickett, from his favorite horse, Spradley, at Mexico City in 1908 At that time, as the result of a challenge, he jumped from the back of his horse to the horns of a grain-fed fighting bull, in the bull ring in that city.

I'll see you here next month.

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The Man-hunt In Hell

The guiding hand of Rock's somehow kept fear from his heart through that blazing inferno.

By Buck Gilmore

There was a thousand good, golden dollars on Jim Reevers' outlaw head. So Rance Sherman, blood-bounty lawman, built a trap for the crafty renegade—and baited it with Jim's own son, who would gladly die so that his fugitive dad might go free!

RANCE SHERMAN didn't look like a professional man-hunter, and perhaps that was one reason he was so successful. He didn't act like one nor look like one. He had a round, almost fat face which smiled easily. It was only his eyes, as they peered steadily over the sights of a gun that made a man feel the icy coldness there, deep in Sherman's soul.

During the years he had hunted men, he had gotten every one he went after, excepting one. But he was after that man now, and like all the others, this fugitive had a fat price on his head. But unlike the rest of the men Sherman had gone after, the man-hunter hated him with an undying vindictiveness.

He was an outlaw, and his name was Jim Reever. Sherman hated him because he had killed Dick Sibley, and Dick Sibley had been the lawman's one friend. It seemed to Sherman that most all the feeling died in him when Dick Sibley died.

Rance Sherman sat at the desk in the sheriff's office in Toyah. He looked down the street and saw young Rock Reever, the son of the outlaw Jim Reever

Rock was about twenty-two; he had been six or seven when his father had killed Dick Sibley.

Fifteen years ago that had been, and Rance Sherman had traveled all over the country trying to find Jim Reever since then. Many an outlaw was now behind bars or was buried in boothill because Rance Sherman had taken their trail. But there had been no sign of Jim Reever.

Fifteen years of futile searching and growing hate, until at last Sherman had struck on the plan he was working on now. He had guessed that if Jim Reever was alive, sooner or later he would get in touch with his son.

Sherman knew that Jim Reever was crazy about his motherless boy, and Rance Sherman had always kept track of Rock. He had dropped in now and then wherever he knew the boy to be. He had watched him as he grew up and drifted from place to place, finally to settle in Toyah. And now Rance Sherman had settled in Toyah too.

HE DISCARDED his marshal's badge that let him roam in search of Jim Reever, and had settled down in Toyah to wait. Then Sherman managed to become sheriff. He had even managed to persuade Rock Reever to accept an appointment as deputy under him. He had done that because he knew he could watch Rock Reever closer if he was working for him. He could watch him, hate him, and hope that some day Rock Reever would make a slip.

He might get a letter, or a messenger might come. At any rate, something would happen. And when it did, he'd see the light of it in Rock's eyes. He'd know, all right, when he heard from his father, Jim Reever. . . .

Rock Reever was coming up from the post office now. An old, white-haired Mexican, leading a lightly loaded burro, came up the street ahead of Rock. Sheriff Sherman remembered that he saw the Mexican in town every once in a while. He knew he came in and bought a few supplies, then led his plodding burro out unto the hills again. Rance didn't know where the Mexican lived. He didn't care. Nobody cared.

Rance Sherman watched the boy carefully. He looked at his eyes and the expression on his face, but it was just the same as always. If he had gotten any mail from old Jim Reever he was guarding his expression well.

Rock grinned and nodded to Rance. He took off his vest and went on through the office. Rance heard a splash of water and knew that Rock was washing his face. Then he saw a white slip of paper peeping out from the inside pocket of the vest. He stood before the vest and waited till Rock and finished washing.

"I wish you'd run up and ask Judge Wallis if he's heard anything about Dirk Poggin," Rance told Rock. "I've got a hunch he'll bob up here some day. Ask him if he heard any reports about Poggin while he was up in Sierra Blanca."

Rock put away the towel, looking at Rance as he stood between him and his

vest that hung on the chair. He made it hard for Rock to reach it.

"I'm writing a letter to Sheriff Wilson," Rance went on. "I wish you'd hurry. If there's anything about Poggin in the air I want to tell it to Wilson."

Rock seemed to hesitate, then went on without his vest Rance Sherman watched Rock till he was well up the street, then slipped the paper from Rock's vest. He unfolded it and read:

My son:

As long as Rance Sherman is near it is not safe. The man is not human. He has no feeling. He has no heart, and he is like a fox in his cunning. Do not trust him for a minute. He would arrest his own brother if there was a dollar in it for him, and I believe he would arrest me just for the joy he would get from it.

It is true that he probably believes that I killed Dick Sibley wantonly. For that I cannot blame him, for it was very cleverly arranged. But even though you would tell him that Sibley had a gun in his hand when I drew mine, he wouldn't believe it. Nobody would, because Sibley's relatives—his half-brother Dan, perhaps—took the gun away before it was seen.

They all hated me for killing Dick. They wanted it to look like murder, and they did it. And Rance Sherman wouldn't care that Dick Sibley's bullet which he fired at me, did almost as much to me as mine did to him. Rance Sherman would care for nothing except the money he would get if he arrested or killed me. He's that kind of man. I'm looking forward to the time when it will be safe again for you to come to see me.

Your father,

Jim Reever.

THE LETTER was written precisely and it puzzled Rance Sherman a bit. It seemed to stilted for a man like Jim Reever to have written.

Sherman looked hurriedly for an envelope so he could find a postmark to tell him where Jim Reever was hidden, but there was no envelope. Rance read the letter through again and put it back in Rock's vest pocket.

He sneered at some of the things written in the letter about Sibley having a gun and somebody taking it away, and about Sibley's bullet doing something to Jim Reever. Sibley had been murdered, and even if he hadn't been, Jim Reever had a thousand dollars reward on his head. He'd killed Rance Sherman's best friend. Rance Sherman hated the guts of him for that. . . .

Sherman went into the office and started his letter to Wilson, sheriff of the next county, which he had to be writing when Rock came back.

He wrote about an outlaw, reported near Wilson's county. He didn't believe much in the rumor, but he wrote about it anyway, just so he'd keep Rock from being suspicious. Rock came back and Rance saw him look at his vest as he came in

"The judge said he didn't hear a thing about Poggin," Rock said.

He went back and put on his vest and from the corner of his eye Sherman saw him pat the pocket where the letter reposed. Rance kept on writing.

His eyes were a frosty, ice-cold blue. He appeared to be thinking of something pleasant, as he rose and went down the street to drop his letter in the post office. And he was thinking of something pleasant. He was thinking of the thousand dollars on Jim Reever's head, remembering what the outlaw had written to his boy, about Sibley having a gun; about a bullet doing something to Jim Reever.

But above all those things was the thought that another outlaw would soon be trapped, and a thousand dollars would be in Rance Sherman's pocket. Yes, after fifteen years, Rance Sherman would collect on Jim Reever's scalp. All he would have to do would be to give Rock Reever rope enough to hang his father! For Jim Reever was looking forward to the time when it would be safe for Rock to visit him. And all that would be nec-

essary for Rance Sherman to do would be to make it *appear* that it was safe for Rock to make that visit. . . .

Sherman dropped the letter in the slot at the frame post office. He made his way to the little yellow telegraph station and smiled at the telegraph operator as he wrote a telegram:

> Sheriff, Hale County, Texas.
> Advise if reward on killer of Dick Sibley and conditions of capture—Dead or alive.
> Sherman, Sheriff, Denton County.

"Send that and don't mention it to anybody," said Sherman. "When the answer comes don't give it to anybody but me."

Rance Sherman smiled again in that abstracted way as the operator said, "Okay, Sheriff."

Back at the office, Rock Reever eyed him curiously, seeming to pay particular attention to that smile.

Rock Reever was the only one who never smiled back at Rance Sherman. That expression seemed to fascinate Rock, and Sherman turned away, busying himself with some papers on his desk. He must make it easy for Rock to visit the man who wanted so badly to see him.

"I think there's something to this Poggin," he said. "I've got a hunch I might pick up some trace of him if I scout around. I'm going up into the hills. I'll probably be gone all day."

Rock Reever said nothing. He watched while Rance mounted and rode away.

Sherman wanted to look back as he rode up into the hills. But he didn't look back till he had vanished over the rise, stopped and hid his horse, then crawled back to a bush at the rim of the hill. There, he directed a long, powerful telescope toward the town.

He saw Rock Reever, standing in the doorway of the office, still looking out toward the hills. Rance wondered if the kid suspected. . . .

All day long Rance lay there. He was patient. He had waited fifteen years to capture Jim Reever, and he could wait another day. No lines of impatience or disappointment showed on his placid face when the shadows crept down from the hills and Rock Reever had still not left town. Then Sherman folded the telescope and went to his horse. He rode slowly through the shadows and reached Toyah as darkness settled down over the town.

Rock Reever had excitement in his eyes as Sherman came into the office. "Poggin *is* in the country!" Rock announced as Sherman came in. "Tom Huggins came in all a-lather about an hour ago. He recognized Poggin, spotted him out near Devil's Bluff. Poggin was wounded, and Tom was afraid to tackle him alone. I was just getting ready to go after him, in case you didn't show up."

Rance thought it was a little funny that he had been bluffing about Poggin, when he was really here. He was sorry about that, for it took time to chase Poggin that could be used in trapping Jim Reever. And Poggin had only five hundred dollars, on his head while Jim Reever had a thousand. . . .

THEY rode swiftly through the darkness, Rock Reever explaining where Tom Huggins had said Poggin would probably hole up. "We can surprise him near the pass through Devil's Bluff," he told Sherman. "That's where he'll probably camp."

They climbed up into the hills, and the stunted pines retarded their progress. They climbed higher, into the dense forests that shrouded the peaks, moving carefully toward the cleared, rocky bluffs that would be the ideal place for Poggin to camp.

A horse nickered in the clearing, and Rance cursed softly as the sound of pounding hoofs came to their ears,

muffled by the dense trees and brush

They pushed their horses, racing across the clearing, but nothing was in sight. The drum of hoofs had faded away. The moon burst out bright and round from behind a cloud and slanted down across Rance Sherman's slightly smiling lips. Rock, looking at him, seemed to shiver a little.

Rance's frosty blue eyes looked about the clearing. He saw that there was only one trail down which Poggin could go, and his smile broadened. He motioned with a nervously moving hand and they raced along the narrow trail, lined now with heavy brush, rimmed by giant pines that hid it from the light of the moon.

Rance Sherman thought it was strange that he was riding beside the son of the man he hated, and beside the young fellow he hated. He thought of the things Jim Reever had said in his note, and wished this was Reever ahead of him instead of Poggin.

Then the smell of a rich, aromatic smoke stung Rance's nostrils as they swept furiously along the trail. The red flicker of flame glowed ahead of them, and the dim shape of a rider flashed across Sherman's vision. Poggin had fired the timber, but was wounded so badly he couldn't make time.

Rance spurred his horse to a faster gait. He felt his horse falter when the smoke thickened and fight against the fast pace. Thick swirls of the gray vapor swept snakily across the trail. Poggin was slowing every few hundred yards or so to light the brush beside the trail.

The horses were hard to manage now. They were nervous, and jumped when a red tongue of flame leaped out venomously at them. The crackle of the fire grew louder, the smoke thicker, and Rance Sherman realized suddenly that he was in a trap.

He had ridden past the first fires that had been lit, then had been forced to slow his pace as the smoke had thickened, and now he was in the midst of a roaring inferno.

There was a raging hell behind him, a blast furnace on each side. And there was a leaping, crackling hot death before him.

Suddenly the heat seared and pressed down on his brain. The bewildering, blinding maze of leaping flame seared like sharpened swords, and the world went blood-red and mad with those leaping, crackling swords of fire. The black, smoke-filled sky was filled with lazily floating comets of fire that drifted down to burn and sear

The smell of burning cloth came up to Rance Sherman's nose and he slapped at his shirt where it was afire. His horse was trying to back away. Suddenly his mount screamed, dashed away and smashed against a tree

Rance picked himself up and saw the dim, smoke-wreathed form of Rock Reever fighting toward him. Rock dismounted, tried to hold his horse while he reached out to help Rance.

The horse fought back and Rance Sherman stumbled and fell. He saw the flames reach toward his face as he fell. The hellish sear of it wrenched a moan from his lips. Then he felt himself being dragged from it. Strong arms were about him, lifting him up. He screamed with the torturing pain that was twisting and searing his face. It was dark, totally, utterly dark, and he tried to open his eyes.

But no matter how much he tried, Rance Sherman couldn't see. He could hear the crackle of the fire all right, and feel the fire-brands that floated down on him. There was Rock Reever's arm about him. But—he couldn't see!

Suddenly the terrifying thought struck him that he was blind. He choked, strangled and coughed. Again he stumbled and felt his belt tighten as Rock

pulled back and kept him from falling He wanted to whimper with the fear that struck him as he kept trying to see. But he was blind—blind!

Each step he stumbled, and Rock held him up. His feet were filled with sharp fiery needles. He was weakened, exhausted. He bumped into a tree and staggered back and would have fallen again except for that firm hand that was fastened onto his belt, shoving him forward when he faltered, steadying him when he was weak. And that guiding hand of the man he hated somehow kept the fear from his heart when he realized that he was stumbling blindly in a world of darkness.

He was growing weaker. He thought of Rock Reever trying to save him, and he laughed, a cracked, half-mad sound that was lost in the roar of flames. Rock Reever helping him, so he could catch Rock's father!

"Shut up, Rance," came Rock's husky voice. "Get hold of yourself!"

RANCE SHERMAN felt himself slipping. He tried to get air, but all he could get was smoke. He finally knew Rock Reever was pulling him. And then, as if by a miracle, the air was pure. He could breathe!

There came the sound of voices and the feel of a horse rocking under him. Then Doc Layton, the doc at Toyah, was talking to him.

Rance wondered why he couldn't see him when he could hear him so well. Then he remembered the searing pain in his face and in his eyes.

"My eyes," he said nervously. "What about my eyes?"

"I won't be able to tell about your eyes for a while," Doc Layton said. "They're swollen and burned so badly now you can't open them. Maybe when you are able to open them you'll be able to see."

Maybe he'd be able to see! But maybe he wouldn't be able to see! Stark terror struck at Rance Sherman. What if this total darkness before his eyes now would stay there always? Darkness. . . . Never a sight of the gray dawn as it crept up over the hills. Always having to grope his way, as long as he lived. . .

Rance didn't move. He was afraid to move, afraid to speak, afraid they'd see the terror in him, that they'd know his heart was hammering so wildly in his breast.

"I think your eyes will be okay, Rance," said a voice that was Rock Reever's.

A hand fell lightly on Rance's shoulder. Something in the manner of a comforting pat came there. "I think your face was sidewise, Rance," Rock went on. "I pulled you out right away. I'm sure your eyes are okay."

Rance knew Rock was trying to console him, knew that Rock had seen or sensed that terror in him, and it angered him. A Reever seeing Rance Sherman afraid! The son of Jim Reever patting Rance Sherman on the shoulder, trying to tell Rance Sherman not to be frightened!

Rance tried to put a sneer on his lips; he tried to say that he knew his eyes were okay. But he didn't know it, so he couldn't say it. He couldn't do anything but lie there, filled with fear and terror.

He heard the doc leave, heard Rock move about and knew he was in the office because the office chair squeaked when he sat down on it

Already he was beginning to recognize things by sound and acquire the characteristics of a blind man! He didn't want to think about that.

He forced himself to think of Jim Reever, and he wondered where Reever could be hiding, waiting for Rock to visit him. Then the thought came that now, if ever, was Rock Reever's chance!

That was something to keep his mind off the darkness. He told himself that he'd trap Jim Reever yet. He remembered that he'd turned his head when he knew the flames would hit his face. And he'd squinted his eyes hard shut, hadn't he? Then Rock had dragged him out so quickly! Sure! In a few days, a few weeks—pretty soon at any rate—he'd be able to see again. Then he'd fool both Rock and Jim Reever. And one more outlaw would know that Rance Sherman never missed.

RANCE SHERMAN clung desperately to that idea. He made himself believe it, for he knew if he didn't have faith in that, he'd crack. That abstract smile came to his lips again, as he evoked the picture of Jim Reever, captured after fifteen years, came to his just end at last.

The doctor came every day to change the bandages on Rance's eyes. The agony left them

"It won't be long till you can open them," Doc told him.

Rance started trying to open them right away. When he knew he was alone, he pushed up the bandages and tried to work the blistered lids. Then he could see a slit of grayish light, like a gray dawn awakening after a black night! He felt his heart hammer. He could see!

The days ticked past and Rance Sherman wondered if Rock had yet visited his father. He guessed he had, for there were whole evenings when Rock did not come to the office. Rance knew it was evening by the faint glow of gold that came from where the lamp was hung on the wall. He heard Rock come in when it was nearly dawn.

Rance finally opened his eyes and the light blazed into them. He looked about the office and knew he was well. He could see everything. There was nothing wrong with his eyes at all! He smiled and pulled the bandage down again.

The doc came next day and Rock was there when he took the bandage off.

"Try opening your eyes," he told Sherman.

But Rance didn't move his eyelids. The doctor spoke again.

"Aren't they open?" Rance finally asked. "I—"

The room was still as death.

"Maybe the nerves that control your lids are affected," the doc said after a while. "Maybe they'll be well pretty soon."

"Sure," said Rock. "They'll be okay."

Not a muscle twitched on Rance Sherman's face. "Sure," he repeated tonelessly, "they'll be okay."

"That's the stuff," said the doctor. "I really think they will, Rance!"

Sherman wanted to laugh. He was just waiting for the next time Rock Reever didn't come back to the office after supper. . . .

THE days passed and the nights passed, and it was fine to know night from day. The telegraph operator came in while Rance Sherman was alone.

"An answer to that telegram you sent," he said to Rance. "It's been here a long time, but I didn't bring it over because you said not to mention it to anybody but you, and it's been hard to catch you alone."

"Read it to me," said Rance.

"A thousand dollars reward on man mentioned," the operator read. "Conditions, dead or alive. Advise when apprehended."

"Thanks," said Sherman. "Burn it."

The operator went out. A thousand dollars, dead or alive! and Rance Sherman's eyes were well!

It was evening when Rock came in. "I'm going out for a while, Rance," Rock said after a few minutes. "Anything you need before I leave?"

Sherman shook his head. He sat by the window and raised the bandages off his eyes as Rock left. He looked out into the street and saw the youngster riding toward the edge of town. He rode on, and Rance Sherman waited till he was only a black dot on the silver-sifted yellow desert sand. Then he rose, slipped out the back door and saddled a horse from the stable in the rear of the jail.

He rode down the alley in the darkness and came out on the desert behind Rock Reever.

Rock climbed into the hills where the greasewood and stunted pine let Rance Sherman get closer. He climbed on into the pines Sherman rode cautiously. Then Rock stopped as he came to what appeared to be a clump of brush beside the trail.

Twin hills rose on each side of a narrow blind ravine that was almost hidden by brush. A faint murmur of sound came from behind the brush.

Sherman dismounted, tied his horse and crept forward. He saw the lighted window of a cabin hidden from the trail.

Through the window three men were visible. An old white-haired man was talking to Rock Reever. His voice was low, but one in a while a word could be heard.

"My son," he said once, and Rance Sherman's smile heightened

Here, before his eyes at last, was Jim Reever. Fifteen years had changed him; he was pale and he looked very old. But somehow he looked satisfied and very happy, as he sat and talked to his son.

And Rock looked happy, too. Rance saw the worshipful light in his eyes as he looked at dad. An old Mexican sat at one side of the room, his black eyes fastened on Jim Reever, listening to him talk.

Rance Sherman's hand slid to his gun, but he didn't draw it. There was a better way to catch Jim Reever than to fight three men for him. For, as he looked through the window at the light in Rock's eyes, Sherman knew that there would be a fight if he tried to take Jim Reever now.

Rock would forget all about the badge on his vest if anybody tried to take Jim Reever away from him. No; there was a safer way to take Jim Reever than to brace three men—one of them a kid with lightning in his gun-hand, a boy who'd go stark, killing mad if anybody tried to harm his father. . . .

RANCE rode back to Toyah and slipped into town through the alley. He put his horse away and went into the office by the back door. He lay down on the couch again, and pretended to be asleep when Rock came in. And he kept his eyes closed next morning when the youngster brought him breakfast.

"I'd like you to run over to Balmorhea today, right away, Rock," he told the deputy. "I want you to see a fellow named Williams and ask him what about Poggin."

"Ask him what about Poggin?"

"That's all," said Sherman.

Rock went out and Sherman heard him ride away. The man named Williams wouldn't be in Balmorhea. Rance knew he was out of town, and would be out of town for a week more. So Rock would turn around and come back to Toyah, and by the time he got back, Jim Reever would be in jail and there'd be nothing Rock Reever could do about it. He'd fight like hell up in the hills, but he wouldn't try to get Jim Reever out of jail. . . .

Rance saddled a horse. When he rode down the street this time, folks stopped and stared at him. Some of them shouted, congratulations to him on getting back his sight. That same smile was on his lips, and it looked as if he was very happy over getting back his sight. He was happy, for a different reason.

He cut into the brush and entered the pines. Then he stopped beside a clump of greasewood, lay down and watched the concealed cabin. He wanted the Mexican out of the way before he tackled Jim Reever. He found a place where he could look through the brush and into the window of the cabin.

Jim Reever was in there, and the Mexican was beside him. The Mexican was writing, and Jim Reever was talking, slowly and evenly. Reever's arm must be crippled so he couldn't write. That must have been what he meant when he'd said in the letter that something had been done to him by Dick Sibley's bullet. And that was why the letter Rance Sherman had seen seemed so stilted in style. The Mex was writing the letters in a precise manner that an American would not use. . . .

MINUTES, then hours, slipped past and Rance Sherman fretted. If one of them did not come out soon, he would have to go in. If he didn't get back to Toyah in a little while, Rock would return. Then he'd find Rance had gone; he'd know that Rance could see, and he'd start out to see where he had gone.

Then the old Mexican came out of the brush

He led a mule onto the trail and trudged on toward town, and Rance Sherman's smile broadened. The Mex was on the way with another note for Rock Reever. Close as he was to his son, Jim Reever had to write to him, since Sherman had come here and become sheriff. That was what Reever had meant when he'd said to take no chance with Rance Sherman.

Rance took his gun in his hand and slipped forward through the brush. He peered through the cabin doorway and saw Reever's back as he sat at a table

Rance crept closer, keeping the gun trained on Reever's back. Then he stepped suddenly into the door and his spur jingled

Jim Reever turned slowly in his chair. He looked straight at Rance, but he didn't speak. Nor did Rance speak. He wanted to savor the full drama of this. Here, after fifteen years of futile pursuit, Rance Sherman was pointing a gun at Jim Reever. The badge glinted on Sherman's vest front, and he wanted Jim Reever to get an eyeful of that, to get a good look at the law that finally had caught up with him.

"Is that you, Rock?" Reever asked suddenly.

Rance opened his mouth, then closed it suddenly. Suddenly a chill chased down his spine. Reever was looking straight at him. He had been staring at him for thirty seconds or more, and now he asked if that was Rock!

Sherman squinted his eyes, moved very silently to one side, his gun still trained on the outlaw, but the man's eyes didn't follow him. They still stared toward the place where the spur had jingled.

"Who's there?" he spoke again. "I know somebody is there. I heard a spur jingle"

Still Rance didn't speak. He was too filled with sudden, fear-filled, sickening memories to speak. For, like a slap in the face, it came to him that Jim Reever was blind. Reever was in the spot that Rance himself had been in. A world of darkness surrounded him, like the darkness that had filled Rance Sherman with terror. And it all came back to him again now.

He had been so intent on getting Reever that his blindness had vanished even from his memory. But now, once again, he seemed to smell the smoke, and to feel the fire sear him. Once more he was back in the office, so filled with fear that he couldn't speak, and Rock Reever was telling him that his eyes would be okay again. . . .

"You're blind?" asked Rance uselessly.

"Who are you?" asked Jim Reever.

RANCE didn't answer. He was beginning to get a hunch. Something in the note to Rock Reever had, about a gun Dick Sibley was supposed to have had; and something a bullet had done to the outlaw. . . . And Rance Sherman was beginning to believe it was true!

"How long have you been blind?" he asked Reever.

"Fifteen years. A bullet did it. But who are you? How did you get here?"

Rance let his gun down. He put it back in his holster. He sighed a little wearily.

"I just stumbled in here, stranger," he said. "I was lost. If I can have a drink, I'll get on."

He took a drink from a crock in the corner. He went out and rode down the trail, where the shadows were creeping toward Toyah. Soberly, poignantly, Rance Sherman realized that for fifteen years Jim Reever had been living in darkness. For fifteen years Jim Reever had experienced the same thing which had terrorized Rance in just a few days. For fifteen years Jim Reever had been called a murderer, but maybe he wasn't a murderer. Rance couldn't believe that a blind man would lie to his son.

Rance stopped at the telegraph station and wrote a wire.

Sheriff, Hale County, Texas.
Mistaken identity on man here. No arrest.

Sherman,
Sheriff, Denton County.

He led his horse up the street. He saw Rock, his dust-covered horse in front of the office, standing on the steps watching him. There was amazement in Rock Reever's eyes.

"You can see, Rance?" Rock asked.

Rance nodded. Yes, he could see. He could see that all that Jim Reever claimed was true. He could imagine how Jim Reever had been blinded by a bullet. He could believe that Dick Sibley's bullet had done that. He could see that he had chased a blind man for fifteen years, thinking him guilty of murder. And he wondered if he could convince the folks down in Hale county of the things he knew. The Sibley folks down there hated the Reevers a lot. But Rance Sherman guessed he could do it. He knew he'd try like hell

He looked up at Rock Reever, the boy who had saved his life, and marveled that for the first time he felt the warming surge of gratitude that he should have felt all along.

He smiled at Rock Reever as he stood there, and it was a different kind of smile than any that had been on his lips before.

Then Rock Reever, for the first time, answered it with a smile of his own. . . .

Up The Trail

WELL over four years ago the first issue of this magazine came out. We were pretty proud of it when it appeared, we still are. But, at the same time, we made it a point never to be quite satisfied with any job we do, for we know that constant striving for perfection—even though it may never be completely attained—is one of the first laws of survival in this world, and a sure indication of healthy growth.

If we buy an automobile, or a toothbrush or a pair of shoes, we seldom go in and lay down our good money without being sure that our purchase will do the job it was meant to do to our own satisfaction. And we're quite apt to shy off from a product made by a firm we're unfamiliar with. We rightly expect a certain standard of performance; we don't want to be flooded with repair bills for our car even though it might be a second-hand job. Too, when we buy a toothbrush we don't want something that will shed bristles like leaves in an October wind; and shoes must be made of good leather and not cardboard. We're reasonably certain that the manufacturers of things we buy take extra pains to see that their products will stand the strain of use. Indeed, the purchaser is often assured that such-and-so product has been put to drastic tests before ever leaving the shop, so that we can be sure of getting our money's worth.

But a fiction magazine is different. We can't use it as a tool; we can't eat it, yet we must be constantly on guard to see that it does its work well; that it gives that necessary extra value in workmanship and in materials. And if there's any way that we can possibly put out a better job, it's up to us to do it.

It has been our aim, since the first issue, to recapture, in the pages of this magazine, all the high drama and the glamorous color of the Old West, from the early days of fur Empire down through the settling of the cow-country, to the crimson-splashed, heroic close of the last century. We did not have in mind a magazine which published only cattle-land stories, or told only of outlawry. What we did want was to catch the spirit of the entire frontier—to give a cross-section of those brave glory days when the courage and sweat of men—and women, too—pushed a new civilization beyond the last outposts.

It was a new and ambitious program,

(Continued on page 138)

(Continued from page 137)

and a difficult one to carry through. How could we present—in every issue—a living sample of that great panorama—catch the breath of living history in all its human conflict, against the grandeur of unscaled towering peaks, of desolate deserts as yet uncrossed, or bring from the dust of the years the creaking, white-tilted wagons starting on their great trek into a new and perilous land?

The answer was simple. We needed more stories in each issue. But stories—good, accurate, human yarns of the type we demanded—were not easy to find in large numbers. It was sometimes difficult to buy even eight good ones in the short thirty-day period we had between issues in which to shop for them. We persisted, however, and as time went on we built up inventories, discovered new authors, bought more stories.

So now, starting with this issue of *Star Western* and continuing thereafter, we are offering not seven or eight, but twelve stories of the stirring times when drama and adventure rode high along the unblazed trails

Of course that change meant extra effort, more cost and more work. To begin with, our authors were accustomed to writing in lengths which were not adaptable to our new program. It meant hours and days of working closely with them, talking plots and discussing the stories before they began to write. It meant arranging for extra art work; discarding dozens of ideas and stories, so that this issue and those that follow will meet our drastic requirements. It meant, too, long conferences with the printers, for even their routine was affected in this change. But at last we believe that we have reached a new high in presenting the story of the West that Was, in all its varied forms of fascinating, living drama.

Let's take one last look at this issue before the presses start rolling. Harry Olmsted, we believe, has done a real job of writing in his lead novel, "Revolt of the Prairie Legion." The ranks of those who actually saw the swift and violent development of towns such as old Laramie are fast thinning, yet we venture to say that those who are left may read this and live again in those desperate and exciting times which have passed. Once more they may get all the breath-catching action, all the salty color of a town conceived in violence, when the blows of sledges on steel rails beat the rhythm of a new and mighty empire.

John G. Pearsol takes us up to the mining country, in a madman's quest for rich red gold—which so soon mingled with the life-blood of those who sought it. And Mamook, the fighting grizzly queen, returns once more to keep her desperate vigil against the ruthless, two-legged invaders of her wilderness stronghold.

Then there's the saga of Jim Wilder's one-man invasion of a range which might mean life for his horse-herd, but which certainly promised death for himself and his three half-starved riders—another authentic example of the type of fighting courage which was so much a part of the pioneers of those desperate days. And

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in another novelette Phil Ketchum takes us into the drouth-stricken cattle-country, where the ruthless ambition of one man swept a once-mighty range into a tragic war of destruction.

Norman Fox, Dabney Otis Collins and Stanley Allen also bring back different phases of authentic Western life in stories which we believe are representative of the smashing drama of civilization's westward march.

Should a tragic hard-pressed nester family face death because they showed the human neighborliness that was typical of the pioneers? Can a man afford to sell his priceless heritage to fulfill his own personal ambition in the never-ending chase for such a horse as that wild blue stallion? Or can an ex-convict ever hope to mend the lives of two small ranchers, whom years past he has helped to send to misery? Those authors, we believe, present their problems with all the human poignancy and red-blooded action which branded the frontier.

Guy Weadick, a cowman down to his boots, knows cowboys and cattle from way back when. He also knows all about what has developed into one of the most exciting entertainment fields in the country—the rodeo. Who could tell its story better from the time the first cowboy pitted his strength and nerve against the horns and hoofs of wild cattle?

And there's Dick Wood, an authority on the history of out-of-doors life as well as having had plenty of experience against the wilderness of today. How do the methods of the buckskin men compare with those among us who now live by the gun and trap-line?

Buck Gilmore, a writing Texan, tells the tale of a man who followed the bounty-money trails—a professional man-hunter. Yet, for all his cold-bloodedness, there was one time when he did a generous and human thing—at risk of his life.

So there it is—this first issue, carry-

(Continued on page 140)

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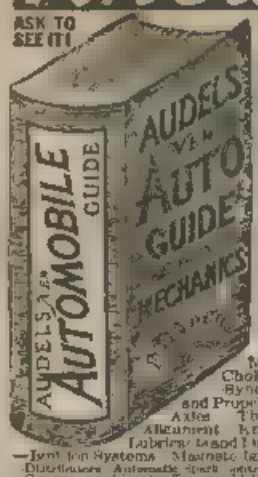

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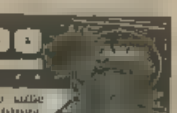

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(Continued from page 139)

ing more stories than we have offered in the past—and we believe that here is a living cross-section of the frontier West . .

Let's see what's on the program for next month. Again Harry Olmsted has come through with a "different" Western which takes us far away from the scene of the wild end-of-steel towns. This is the story of a rough-string man, a young bronc peeler in the Little Snowies. But Heath Condron was different from the usual run of tough young gents who broke fuzz-tails on that rough range. It was his sheer love of mastering a sun-fishing, exploding bronc that made the ranchers there notice him almost at once. That—and the fact that he had tamed the famous Yellow Fever—outlaw killer horse.

There were other man-breakers in that famous horse-country beside the four-hoofed kind. Among them was a man named Denzil Bard—a hard-bitten cowman whose boast it was that he took what he wanted and no man dared stand in his way. Bard's land and stock were the best that money could buy; his riders were worth the high wages they commanded, though they earned every penny of it under their boss' driving commands. Yet, when Heath turned down the offer of a job on the Bard spread, that man of unbreakable pride swore that he'd horse-whip the peeler if he ever showed up on the spread.

That promise was a challenge to Heath Condron. When he got through taming one rough string, he rode over to Bard's ranch.

Denzil Bard stood stock-still, apparently awed by the nerve of the soft-spoken rider who seemed fated to cross him. Then his eyes fastened themselves on Heath, and the peeler had full view of the unbanked flame that roared unchecked through this man's being. All warmth and compassion were lacking in his stare, all humor and friendliness. Here indeed was a man gone

bronc, and Heath, hopeful up to now, questioned his ability to gentle this one.

As Bard seemed to gather himself, Heath unconsciously braced for the explosion he knew was coming. But instead the man's voice was low and controlled.

"I told you that if you showed up here accordin' to your promise, I'd horse-whip you off the spread. I meant that. I'm goin' to the barn now for a whip. If you're here when I get back . . ."

"Father!" came a soft voice from the door, and Heath looked up. He remembered that girl, recalled her own pride when she had wanted to buy Heath's chestnut horse—which was not for sale at any kind of money.

"Shut up, Sally!" barked the rancher from over his shoulder. Her eyes were clouded and troubled now as she stepped out onto the porch.

"He means it!" she gasped. "Get on your horse and ride—now! Don't wait!"

"Run away from him?" said Heath, unbelieving. "I never ran from a man in my life. And if I ran now, I'd have to keep running—always! It's too late to start!"

Then Danzil Bard was coming from the barn, a long blacksnake whip in his hand, its promise punishing as he swung his thick right arm back and forth. "Get on that sorrel plug and stir dust, cowboy!" he roared. "You're too damn smart for the Crazy B!"

Heath Condron's face settled and chilled, but he made neither answer nor move. Nor did he give sign that he heard when the girl cried out a last warning and slammed the door behind her. But Heath's ears had caught the sound of a sob before she left. . . .

"You can beat a dog or a horse, Bard, but not a man!" Heath's low voice was tense as he turned to the approaching rancher.

"When a man crosses me," clipped the

(Continued on page 142)

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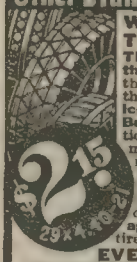

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29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
6.25-17	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
6.50-17	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.40
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.40
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32x4½	3.35	1.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
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38x7	10.95	4.65
36x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

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Size	Tires	Tubes
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(Continued from page 141)

cowman, "he earns a beatin'!" And so keyed up was he to brutality that he couldn't resist taking an ugly cut at Heath's chestnut as he passed.

There was a shrill equine scream of rage. The horse rose, whirled on his hind feet and struck, but the tie rope fouled him and he fell heavily.

Down came the whip again, a half scream, half roar guttering from the animal's throat. Dust rose thickly, and through it came Heath's choked cry: "A tied horse, mebbe, Bard—but never a *man!*"

The rancher swung with the lash, and though Heath flung up his arm, it bit cruelly into his cheek. Yet before Bard could jerk the curling loop from Heath's wrist, the bronc-peeler had grabbed it. Hand over hand he crawled along the whip, his eyes blazing pools of wrath. They were the same eyes Bard had seen when Heath had conquered the Yellow Fever horse—the day of their first meeting. And they did something to Bard.

"Keep back from me, damn you!" the rancher bawled. "Keep back from me or I'll kill you sure!"

"Wait," ordered the youngster. "You want a fight, and you want that chestnut horse of mine. How about you and me making a swap? You and me—we go behind the barn and fight it out. If you win, you get my chestnut horse and I walk off the ranch. If I win, you give me a job here for a year."

"To hell with you!" snapped Bard. "If I win, I get the horse. If you win, I pay you two thousand for him."

"I don't want your money," said Heath. "Nor I don't want to be a peeler for you. I aim to be foreman of your ranch for one year—if I win."

"Take him up, Dad," came a girl's voice from the house. "You promised me the horse, and now you act afraid of its owner."

Bard's voice was touched with despera-

ation as he said, "You made the proposition, feller. Now let's see you make good on it. C'mon. I'll see you down with the mark of my heel on your face!"

Then Heath was matching the cowman's stride toward the barn, and taking one last rueful look toward the chestnut horse as the frightened beast lunged back to its four feet.

For the first time in his life, he was staking the horse that he loved against — what?

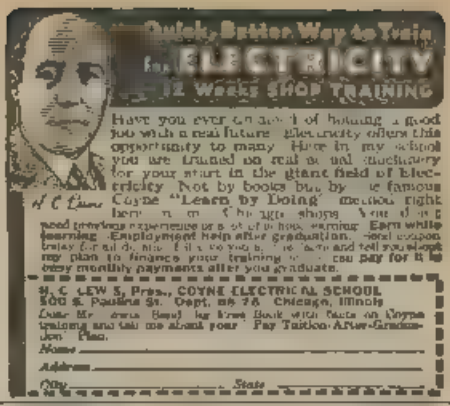
That fight made history in that part of the horse country. Yet only later on that man-breaker spread, did Heath realize that it was a madman's bargain, conceived in desperate combat and baptised in blood. Against him, every foot of the way stood Bard, unbroken and still fighting, yet with honor enough to live up to his end of the committment. And beside him was the girl, whose bitter pride and arrogance Heath had sworn to gentle.

It's the story of that struggle which brings back all the great drama of the days of the free ranges. Here Harry Olmsted has built a story from the life-blood of the old West, where combat was the essence of life and a man must be able to take his beating, then rise again and fight so long as there was breath left in his body. It's a story of two strong men pitted against each other, to preserve their stubborn pride—and their right to the wild country they had fought for.

This starts off the August issue, and we've called it "Man-Breakers' Last Job."

Then there's a Tom Roan novelette—"Ride for the Raider's Camp-Fire!"—which recalls to vivid life the wild days shortly after the Civil War when trail wolves rode to pillage richly-loaded wagon-trains and prairie trading posts. It started when Calico Bill McBride came back to his trading post with a wagon of trade goods. But Bill was headed for

(Concluded on page 144)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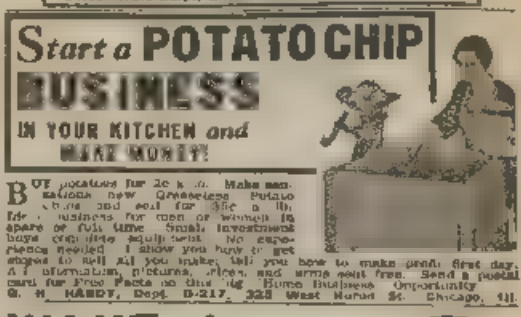

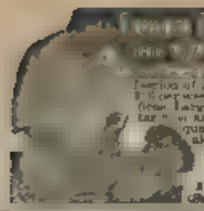

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(Continued from page 143)

tragedy and death, for Yankee Jake, Dutch Larch and the hell-scum of the seething outpost towns had already visited his little post and left it a mass of smouldering ruins, along with the charred remains of the brave men and women who had given their lives to defend it. The story of Calico Bill McBride's vengeance, we believe, reflects all the stark, swiftly-paced drama and high adventure of those great days. With them, there will be ten other tales, both long and short, featuring the life-like vigorous men and women who made history in the untamed West, by such authors as T. T. Flynn, W. H. B. Kent, John G. Pearsol, and others.

The next issue is published on July 5th!

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ATHLETE'S FOOT

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According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF ITS SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

HERE'S HOW TO TREAT IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissue of the skin where the germ breeds.

ITCHING STOPS IMMEDIATELY

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

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Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

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